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Name and Fame

BY

ADELINE SARGEANT

AND

EWING LESTER

Authorized Edition

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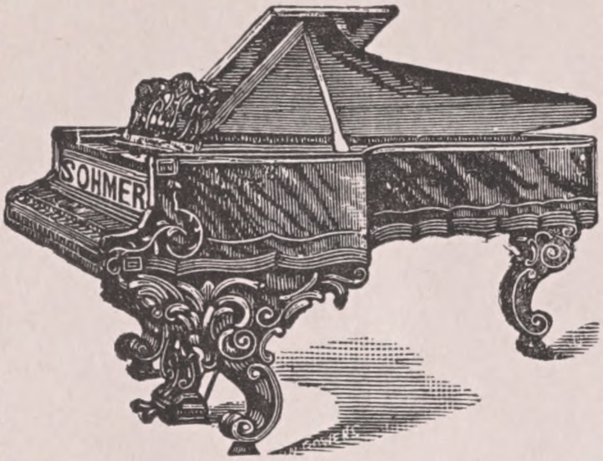

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NAME AND FAME

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BY
ADELINE SARGEANT
AND
EWING LESTER

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BOOK I.

CHOICE.

"Aus dem Leben heraus sind der Wege zwei dir geöffnet;
Zum Ideale führt einer, der andre zum Tod.
Siehe, dass du bei Zeit noch frei auf dem ersten entspringest,
Ehe die Parze mit Zwang dich auf dem andern entführt."

SCHILLER.

NAME AND FAME.

CHAPTER I.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

It was a brilliant day in June. The sky was cloudless and dazzlingly blue, but the heat of the sun's rays was tempered by a deliciously cool breeze, and the foliage of the trees that clothe the pleasant slopes round the vivacious little town of Aix-les-Bains afforded plenty of shade to the pedestrian. Aix was, as usual, very crowded and very gay. German potentates abounded: French notabilities were not wanting: it was rumored that English royalty was coming. A very motley crowd of divers nationalities drank the waters every morning and discussed the latest society scandal. Festivity seemed to haunt the very air of the place, beaming from the trim white villas with their smart green jalousies, the tall hotels with crudely tinted flags flying from their roofs, the cheery little shops with their cheerier *dames de comptoir* smiling complacently on the tourists who unwarily bought their goods. Ladies in gay toilets, with scarlet parasols or floating feathers, made vivid patches of color against the green background of the gardens, and the streets were now and then touched into picturesqueness by the passing of some half-dozen peasants who had come from the neighboring villages to sell their butter or their eggs. The men in their blue blouses were mostly lean, dark, and taciturn; the women, small, black-eyed, and vivacious, with bright-colored petticoats, long earrings, and the quaintest of round white caps. The silvery whiteness of the lake, flashing back an answer to the sunlight, gave a peculiarly joyous radiance to the scene. For water is to a landscape what the eye is to the human countenance: it gives life and expression; without it, the most beautiful features may be blank and uninteresting.

But the brightness of the scene did not find an echo in every heart.

"Dame!" said a French waiter, who stood, napkin in hand, at a window of the Hôtel Venat, watching the passers-by, "there they go, that cold, sullen English pair, looking as if nothing on earth would make them smile again!"

A bullet-headed little man in a white apron stepped up to the window and stared in the direction that Auguste's eyes had taken.

"Tiens, donc! Quelle tournure! But she is superb!" he exclaimed, as if in remonstrance.

"She is handsome—oui, sans doute; but see how she frowns! I like a woman who smiles, who coquettes, who knows how to divert herself—like Mademoiselle Lisette here, queen of my heart and life."

And Auguste bowed sentimentally to a pretty little chambermaid who came tripping up the stairs at that moment, and laid his hand upon his heart.

"You are too polite, Monsieur Auguste," Lisette responded amicably. "And at whom are you gazing so earnestly?"

"At the belle Anglaise—you can still see her, if you look—she is charmingly dressed, but——"

"She is magnificent! simply magnificent," murmured the bullet-headed Jean, who was not, like his friend, enamored of the pert Lisette. "I have never seen so splendid an Englishwoman, never! nor one who had so much the true Parisian air!"

Lisette uttered a shrill little scream of laughter. "Do you know the reason, mon ami? She is not English at all: she is a compatriot. He—the husband—*he* is English; but she is French, I tell you, French to the finger-tips."

"Voyons; what rooms have they?"

"They are au quatrième—they are poor—poor," said Lisette, with infinite scorn. "I wait on them a little—not much; they have been here three days, and one can see —— But the gentleman, he is generous. When madame scolds, he gives me money to buy my forbearance; she has the temper of a demon, the tongue of a veritable fiend!"

"Ah! He loves her, then!" said Auguste, putting his head on one side.

Lisette snapped her fingers. "Ah, oui! He loves her so well that he will strangle her one of these days when she says a word too much and he is in his sombre mood! Quiet as he is, I would not go too far with him, ce beau monsieur! He will not be patient always—you will see!"

She went on her way, and the waiters remained at the window in the corridor. The lady and gentlemen of whom they spoke had turned into the hotel garden, and were walking up and down its gravelled paths, apparently in silence. Auguste and Jean watched them, as if fascinated by the sight of the taciturn pair, who now and then were lost to sight behind a clump of trees or in some shady walk, presently reappearing in the full sunshine, with the air of those who wish for some reason or other to show themselves as much as possible.

This, at least, was the impression produced by the air and gait of the woman; not by those of the man. He walked beside her gravely, somewhat dejectedly, indeed. There was a look of resignation in his face, which contrasted forcibly with the flaunting audacity visible in every gesture of the woman who was his wife.

He was the less noticeable of the two, but still a handsome man in his way, of a refined and almost scholarly type. He was tall, and although rather of slender than powerful build, his movements were characterized by the mingled grace and alertness which may be seen when well-proportioned limbs are trained to every kind of athletic exercise. His face, however, was that of the dreamer, not of the athlete. He had a fine brow, thoughtful brown eyes, a somewhat long nose with sensitive nostrils, a stern-set mouth, and resolute chin. The spare outlines of his face, well defined yet delicate withal, sometimes reminded strangers of Giotto's frescoed head of Dante in his youth. But the mouth was partly hidden beneath a dark brown moustache; a pity from the artistic point of view. Refinement was the first and predominating characteristic of his face; thoughtful melancholy, the second. It was evident, even to the most casual observer, that this man was eminently unfitted to be the husband of the woman at his side.

For a woman she was unusually tall. She was also unusually handsome. She had a magnificent figure, a commanding presence, good features, hair, and eyes ; yet the impression that she produced was anything but pleasant. The flashing dark eyes were too bold and too defiant ; the carmine on her cheeks was artificially laid on, and her face had been dabbed with a powder puff in very reckless fashion. Her black hair was frizzed and tortured in the latest mode, and her dress made in so novel a style that it looked *outré*, even at a fashionable watering-place. Dress, bonnet and parasol were scarlet of hue ; and the vivid tint was softened but slightly by the black lace which fell in cascades from her closely-swathed neck to the hem of her dress, fastened here and there by diamond pins. If it were possible that, as Lisette had said, Mr. and Mrs. Alan Walcott were poor, their poverty was not apparent in Mrs. Walcott's dress. Black and scarlet were certainly becoming to her, but the effect in broad daylight was too startling for good taste. To a critical observer, moreover, there was something unpleasantly suggestive in her movements : the way in which she walked and held her parasol, and turned her head from side to side, spoke of a desire to attract attention, and a delight in admiration even of the coarest and least complimentary kind.

There was certainly something in the bearing of husband and wife that attracted notice. Her vivacity and her boldness, a certain weariness and reluctance in his air, as if he were paraded up and down these garden walks against his will, led others beside inquisitive French waiters to watch the movements of the pair. And they were in full view of several gazers when an unexpected and dramatic incident occurred.

A man who had sauntered out of the hotel into the gardens directed his steps towards them, and met them face to face as they issued from one of the side-paths. He was not tall, but he was dapper and agile : his moustache curled fiercely, and his eyeglass was worn with something of an aggressive air. He was perfectly dressed, except that—for English taste—he wore too much jewellery ; and from the crown of his shining hat to the tip of his polished pointed boot he was essentially Parisian—a dandy of the Boulevards, or rather, perhaps, of the Palais Royal—an exquisite who prided himself upon the fit of his trousers and the swing of his Malacca cane.

He paused as he met the Walcotts, and raised his hat with a true French flourish. The lady laughed, showing a row of very white, even teeth, and held out her hand. Her husband sprang forward, uttering an angry word of remonstrance or command. The Frenchman grinned insolently, and answered with a sneer.

The Englishman seemed to gain in dignity as he replied. His wife laughed loudly and unpleasantly, however, and then, with a quick movement which proved him agile as a cat, the Frenchman struck him with his cane across the face. In another moment, Alan Walcott had taken him by the collar and wrested the cane from his hand. Whether or no he would have administered the thrashing that the man deserved must remain an unsettled question, for hotel servants and functionaries came rushing to the rescue, guests flocked to the scene in hopes of further excitement, and all was bustle and confusion. Mrs. Walcott began to scream violently, as soon as she saw signs of an impending conflict, and was finally carried into the house in a fit of hysterics.

A very pretty little altercation between the two combatants—who were separated with difficulty—and the landlord and his myrmidons then followed. The police arrived rather late on the scene, but were speedily quieted by assurances that peace was restored, and by the transfer of a few coins from Alan Walcott's pockets to their own. The aggressor, who gave his name as Henri de Hauteville, was politely requested to leave the Hôtel Venat; and Mr. Walcott declared his own intention of proceeding to Paris next morning. Accordingly the Frenchman speedily disappeared, but it was noticed that he dropped a word to his enemy, which Walcott answered by a bend of his head, and that he was seen shortly afterwards arm-in-arm with a young officer who was known to be an enthusiast in the matter of duelling.

An hour later Alan Walcott was crossing the hall with a hurried step and a face expressive of deep anxiety and vexation, when he encountered a stout, fair Englishman, who greeted him with effusion.

"You here, Walcott? Never thought of meeting you."

"I'm glad to see you, Dalton. I was longing at that very moment for some one to act as my friend."

"Not in the conventional meaning, I hope," laughed Dalton. "Your way of putting it suggests a duel—which no Englishman of any sense would embark in, I should hope!"

Dalton was a fresh-colored, blue-eyed man, of nearly thirty years of age. His frankness of manner and shrewdness of expression contrasted forcibly with the subtle dreaminess characteristic of Alan Walcott's face. Alan eyed him curiously, as if doubtful whether he should proceed.

"I am not altogether an Englishman," he said presently, "which may account in your eyes for some lack of sense. I want you, as a friend, in the most conventional manner possible. Come out with me and let us talk it over."

The two men went out and talked together for upwards of an hour. When they separated the expression of their faces afforded a curious contrast. Alan looked defiant, resolved, almost triumphant; but Brooke Dalton went on his way wagging his head in a depressed and melancholy manner, as if his soul were afflicted by misgivings of many kinds.

Mr. Alan Walcott had said that he should leave Aix-les-Bains next day, but the state of his wife's health rendered it impossible for her to quit the hotel, and he could not very well separate himself from her. She continued for some time in shrieking hysterics, varied by fainting fits; and when she became quieter, under the influence of a soporific administered by the doctor, she declared herself quite too ill and exhausted to rise from her bed. Her husband remained with her night and day, until the second morning, when he escaped from her sight and ken for a couple of hours, and absolutely refused to tell her where he had been. His refusal seemed to produce a quieting effect upon her. She became very still, and lay watching him, with a sullen, puzzled look in her great dark eyes. He took up a paper and began to read, with an assumption of complete calmness and unconcern; but she saw that he was paler than usual, and that his hand shook a little as he turned the pages of his *Galignani*. Presently she asked, in a subdued voice, for something to drink.

He brought her a glass of claret and water, and she raised herself a little on one arm to take it from him. Suddenly she uttered a loud cry, and fell back gasping upon her pillows.

"Mon Dieu!" she cried, "there is blood upon your cuff."

Alan looked down hastily. It was true enough: his white cuff was stained with red.

"You have killed him!" she said. "You have murdered him, you wretch, you murderer——"

"Not at all," said Walcott, with the greatest composure. "Upon my word, I rather wish I had. I think he deserved it. He has got off very easily."

"You had a meeting?" his wife shrieked, her eyes beginning to flash with rage.

"We had a meeting. It was for that purpose that I left for two hours this morning. You don't suppose that I should let myself be struck in the face without demanding satisfaction? I have enough French blood in my veins to think it a very natural way of settling such a quarrel ——"

"Was he hurt?" she asked, without waiting for him to finish.

"Very slightly. A sword-cut on the shoulder. The seconds interposed, or we should have gone on——"

"I have no doubt you wanted to kill him! I shall denounce you to the police!"

"As you please," said her husband indifferently, taking up his paper. "But M. de Hauteville has retired from the scene: he had a carriage waiting, and has crossed the frontier by this time. I assure you he is perfectly safe in Switzerland."

There was a taunt in his voice which exasperated his wife's temper almost to madness.

"Scélérat!" she said, in a hissing, unnatural voice. "You would have killed him if you could? Beware of my vengeance then, for I swear that you shall suffer as he has suffered—and worse things too!"

Alan shrugged his shoulders. He had heard threats of this kind too often to be greatly moved by them. And Mrs. Walcott, after a few ineffectual remarks of the same sort, began to sob violently, and finally to work herself into another hysterical fit, during which her husband coolly rang the bell, and left her to Lisette's not very tender care.

When he returned she was once more quiet and subdued. He noticed that she was reading a letter, which, at his entrance, she thrust—somewhat ostentatiously—beneath her pillow. He took no notice. He was tired of taking notice. As a rule, he let her go her own way. He had been married for three years, and he had learned that, save in exceptional circumstances, it was better not to interfere. He was relieved, and somewhat surprised, when she suddenly declared herself better, and wishful to leave her bed. Before long she was sitting at an open window, with a cup of black coffee and a flask of cognac on a table before her, while Alan fanned her with a great red fan and occasionally bathed her temples with eau-de-cologne. He paid her these attentions with an air of gentle gravity which became him well, but the slight fold between his brows betokened irritation and weariness.

Cora Walcott seemed to delight in keeping him at her beck and call. She did not let him stir from her side for the whole of that sultry summer day. She put on a soft and languid manner: she shed tears and tried to say coaxing things, which were very coldly received; for there was a hard and evil look in her fine dark eyes that went far to neutralize the effect of her *câlineries*. Once, indeed, when Alan had gone into an adjoining room to fetch a vinaigrette, her true feeling found its vent in a few expressive words.

"Sacré," she muttered, drawing back the red lips from her white teeth, with the snarl of a vicious dog, "how I hate you, cochon! How I wish that you were dead!"

And then she smoothed her brows, and smiled at him as he re-entered the room.

In the course of the evening she made the suggestion that they should leave Aix-les-Bains next day.

"Certainly," Alan answered, more warmly than usual. "And where shall we go?"

"Oh, to Paris, I suppose. To Dijon first, of course—if I am strong enough to travel so far."

Alan was eager to make his preparations for departure, and pleased to find that his wife was as ready as he to hasten them. Only in one point did her behavior strike him as peculiar. She announced that she meant to leave Aix-les-Bains at an early hour, lunch and rest at Culoz, and go on to Dijon by the afternoon train.

"But why Culoz? Nobody stops at Culoz," he remonstrated.

"Why not Culoz? There is an inn. I suppose we can get some lunch," she answered. "Besides, I have always meant to go there, to look at the château on the hill! You English like 'views,' do you not? The 'view' must be magnificent."

She had never formerly shown any interest in scenery, and Alan stared at her for a moment with a puzzled look. If Henry de Hauteville had been likely to join her at Culoz he could have understood this whim of hers; but de Hauteville was safely lodged by this time in the nearest Swiss canton, and not at all likely to intercept their journey. He did her bidding, however, without comprehension of her reasons, as he had done many a time before. Again, he was discomfited by her behavior in the train, shortly after their departure from the station at Aix-les-Bains. She suddenly flung herself back in the corner of the *coupé* and burst into a prolonged fit of noisy laughter, which seemed as if it would choke her by its violence. Alan questioned and remonstrated in vain. Fortunately, they had the *coupé* to themselves; but the laughter continued so long that he began to doubt his wife's sanity, as well as her self-control. At last she sat up and wiped her eyes.

"You will know why I laugh some day, mon ami," she remarked. "Till then, ask no questions."

Alan was not disposed to ask them. He remained silent, and his silence continued until the little station of Culoz was reached.

"We change here, of course," he said. "But why should we leave the station?"

"Do you want to starve me?" his wife inquired angrily. "We will go to the inn. There is an inn on the road to the village; I asked about it yesterday."

Very few English tourists think it worth their while to spend any time at Culoz, pretty little place although it be; and the landlady of the quaint auberge, with its wooden, vine-grown piazza, was somewhat amazed and distracted by the appearance of foreign visitors. The dining-room seemed to be full of peasants in blue blouses, who had been attending a fair; but lunch was served to Mr. and

Mrs. Walcott in the open air, on the verandah. Cora grumbled openly at the simple fare provided; and Alan thought how charming would be the scene and the rustic meal if only his companion were more congenial. For himself, he was quite satisfied with the long French loaf, the skinny chicken, the well-salted cream cheese, and the rough red *vin du pays*. The blue sky, the lovely view of mountain and valley, lake and grove, the soft wind stirring the vine leaves on the trellis-work of the verandah, would have given him unmixed delight if he had been alone. But all was spoiled by the presence of an unloved and unloving wife.

The road to the château leads upwards from Culoz, and is a trifle hot and dusty. Alan wondered dumbly whether Cora had an object in dragging him so far away from the inn, and what that object was. But he took small annoyances patiently, It was something gained, at least, that his wife should seem content. Anything was better than tearing rage or violent hysterical weeping, which were the phases of temper most frequently presented to his view. On this occasion she appeared pleased and happy. He surprised a touch of malignity in her tones, a glance of evil meaning now and then; but he did not greatly care. Cora could not keep a secret. If she had any ill-will or ill intention towards him he was sure to know it before long.

"I am tired," she said at last, abruptly. "Let us sit down and rest. Look, here is an entrance into the park of the château. Shall we go in?"

"Is it open to the public?" said Alan, with an Englishman's instinctive fear of trespassing. For, although he had had a French grandmother, and sometimes boasted himself of French descent, he was essentially English in his ideas. Cora laughed him to scorn.

"I go where I will," she said, "and nobody finds it in his heart to turn me out. Courage, mon ami, I will protect you, if necessary. Follow me!"

Piqued by her tone, he opened the gate for her, and they passed from the hot, white road into the green demesnes of the Count who owned the château above Culoz. It struck Alan that his wife knew the way wonderfully well. She turned without hesitation into a path which led them to a wooden seat shaded by two great trees, and so situated that it could not be seen by anyone passing on the high road. Here she seated herself and looked up at her husband with a defiant smile.

"You have been here before?" he said suddenly.

She nodded. Precisely, mon ami, I have been here before. And with whom? With M. de Hauteville, when you imagined me suffering from a migraine a few days ago. Surely you did not think that it was his first appearance when he arrived at the hotel, the day before yesterday?"

"I do not wish to discuss M. de Hauteville," said Alan turning away.

"But perhaps I wish to discuss him. We discussed *you* at full length—that day last week. We chronicled your vices, your weaknesses, your meannesses in detail. One thing I might have told him, which I left out—the fact that you are no gentleman, not even bourgeois—a mere peasant clown. He would not have let you measure swords with him if he had known the baseness of your origin, my friend!"

Alan's lips moved as if he would have spoken, but he restrained himself. He saw that she wanted him to respond, to lose his temper, to give her some cause of complaint, some opening for recrimination; and he resolved that he would not yield to her desire. She might abuse him as she would and he would not reply. She would cease when she was tired—and not till then.

"You are a mean-spirited creature!" she said, her eyes flashing hatred at him as she spoke. "You have chained me to you all these years, although you know that I loathe the very sight of you, that I have worshiped Henri, my lover, all the while. Who but a base, vile wretch would not have given me my freedom? You have known all the time that he loved me, and you have pretended ignorance because you did not want to let me go. From the moment I found this out, I have hated and despised you. You have no courage, no spirit; there is nothing even to be afraid of in you. You would be brutal if you dared, but you do not dare. You can be spiteful and treacherous and villainous, that is all. And I hate you for all that you are and all that you do not dare to be!"

Alan ground his teeth, in a moment's raging desire to bring the woman to her senses by some actual exertion of his physical strength. But the impulse of anger lasted only for a moment. He knew that half her rage was simulated—that she was lashing herself up in preparation for some tremendous crisis, and all that he could do was to wait for it in silence. She had risen to her feet as she spoke. He rose too and leaned against the trunk of a tree, while she stormed and raved like a madwoman for some minutes in front of him.

"Now," she said at last, "you know what I think of you, how I hate you, how I despise you. But it is not enough. My father shot down twenty of his enemies in the siege of Paris. Do you think that his daughter is a coward, to be trampled on by a brutal, cold-blooded Englishman? No! Because I hate you, and because you have tried to kill the man I love, and because you are too mean and vile to live—I will kill *you!*"

Her hand darted to the bosom of her dress. Before Alan could stop her—almost before he realized what she was doing—she had drawn out a little pistol, cocked it, and pulled the trigger. But her hurry at the last moment spoiled her aim. Alan felt a sting in the left arm, and knew that she had so far succeeded in her intentions; but with his right hand he was able to snatch the pistol from her, and to fling it far into the brushwood.

Then came the reaction. She burst into loud, screaming sobs and tears, and flung herself on the ground, where she writhed for a time like one in convulsions. Alan seated himself, feeling somewhat sick and faint, and waited for the storm to spend itself. Some time elapsed before she became calm; but at last she raised herself panting from the ground and looked half timorously at her husband. His coolness and quietness often enraged, but now and then it frightened her.

"If you have not another pistol with you," said Alan, "you cannot kill me just now. Perhaps you have done enough to satisfy yourself for the moment. What do you propose to do next?"

"What do *you* mean to do?" she asked sullenly. "Of course, you can follow me and give me up to the police."

"I shall not do that."

"I will not return with you," she said in a furious tone.

"That is natural," Alan agreed politely. "What then?"

"I told you I knew this place," she answered. "I am to meet a friend upon the road, half a mile further on. I am going there now. He will take me to the next station on the line."

"Admirably planned!" said Alan. "Every detail fits in to perfection."

"And I shall never come back," she said, looking at him spitefully.

For answer, he raised his hat. She turned on her heel, went down the slope towards the road, and disappeared. It was a strange parting between husband and wife. Not a single feeling of reluctance existed in the mind of either; only a fixed resolve to have done with each other henceforth and for ever.

Alan bound up his wounds as well as he could, and retraced his steps to Culoz. He would have done better, possibly, to avoid the place. People stared at him curiously as he passed them by. Why had he come back alone? What had he done with the beautiful lady who had accompanied him when he set forth?

"Hé, monsieur," tried the black-eyed dame of the auberge, leaning over the rail of the verandah, as he passed: "ou donc est madame? Est-ce qu'elle ne revient pas?"

"Madame est partie," said Alan continuing his walk without turning round. The aubergiste looked after him in amaze. Where could madame have gone? There was no other road to the station, and she had been watching for the English milord and his lady for the last hour and a half! What had he done with madame?

It was a matter of speculation which lasted her for many a day, and was often recounted to new comers. It became the general opinion at Culoz that the Englishman had in some unaccountable manner killed his wife and disposed mysteriously of her body. But although search was made for it high and low, the murdered body was never found. Nevertheless, the stranger's guilt remained a tradition of the neighborhood, and the story of that marvelous disappearance is related by the villagers unto this day.

Alan went on his way rejoicing, although in somewhat grim and shamefaced wise. For three years he had been a miserable slave. Now he was free! And he determined that he would never submit to bonds again.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE RECTORY.

About the very time when Alan Walcott, at the age of three-and-twenty, was making a hasty match with the daughter of a French refugee—a match bitterly deplored before the first few weeks of married life were over—events, which afterwards very greatly affected his career, were quickly shaping themselves in a sleepy little English village not far from the place where he was born.

Angleford, a mere handful of red-brick cottages, five miles from a railway station, was little known to the outer world. Its nearest market-town was Dorminster, and the village of Thorley lay between Angleford and the county town. Birchmead, a hamlet which had some repute of its own as a particularly healthy place, stood further down the river on which Angleford was built, and its merits generally threw those of neighboring villages into the shade.

But Angleford was in itself a pretty little nook, and its inhabitants somewhat prided themselves on its seclusion from the world. These inhabitants, it must be confessed, were few. It had once been a larger and more important place, but had gradually dwindled away until the village contained less than three hundred persons, chiefly laborers and small shop-keepers. Beside these, there were the doctor, and his wife, the rector and his family, and the squire—a childless widower, who was of rather less account than anybody else in the parish.

The Rectory was a rambling, long, low, red-brick house standing in prettily-wooded grounds, bordered by the river, on the other side of which lay the park belonging to the squire. The park ran for some distance on both sides of the stream, and the Rectory grounds were, so to speak, taken out of the very midst of the squire's demesne. The continuation of wooded ground on either side the narrow winding river made the place particularly picturesque; and it was a favorite amusement for the rector's son and daughter to push a rather crazy boat out of the little boat-house at the foot of the garden, and row up and down those reaches of the stream "between the bridges," which were navigable. One of the bridges warned them of the weir, which it was not very safe to approach; and beyond the other, three miles further down and close to Birchmead, the stream was shallow and clogged with reeds. But within these limits there was a peaceful tranquil beauty which made the boat a favorite resting place for the Rectory people during the long summer evenings and afternoons.

It was two o'clock on a late autumn afternoon, when a girl of sixteen came out of the Rectory door, which always stood hospitably open in fine weather, and walked to the boat-house, as if intending to launch out upon the water. The day was sunny on the whole, but not cloudless: the sun shone out brightly every now and then, and was again obscured by a filmy haze, such as rises so easily from the low-lying land in Essex. But the golden haze softened the distant outlines of wood and meadow, and the sun's beams rested tenderly upon the rapidly stripping branches, where a few rustling leaves still told of their departed glories. The long undefined shadows of the trees stretched far across the wide lawn, scarcely moving in the profound stillness of the air; and a whole assembly of birds kept up a low-toned conversation in the bushes, as if the day were hardly bright enough to warrant a full chorus of concerted song. It was a tender, wistful kind of day, such as comes sometimes in the fall of the year, before the advent of frost. And a certain affinity with the day was visible in the face of the girl who had walked down to the riverside, There was no melancholy in her expression: indeed, a very sweet and happy smile played about the corners of her sensitive mouth; but a slightly wistful look in the long-lashed grey eyes lent an unconscious pathos to the delicate face. But, although delicate, the face was anything but weak. The features were clearly cut; the mouth and chin expressed decision as well as sensibility; and beneath the thick, fine waves of shining brown hair, the forehead was broad and well-developed. Without pretension to actual beauty or any kind of perfection, the face was one likely to attract and then to charm; gentleness, thoughtfulness, intellectual power, might be read in those fair features, as well as an almost infantine candor and innocence, and the subtle and all too-transient bloom of extreme youth. Her hair, which constituted one of her best "points," was simply parted in the middle, fastened with a clasp at the nape of her neck, and then allowed to fall in a smooth, shining shower down to her waist. Mrs. Campion, who had been something of a beauty in her young days, was given to lamenting that Lettice's hair was not golden, as hers had been; but the clear soft brown of the girl's abundant tresses had a beauty of its own; and, as it waved over her light woollen frock of grey-green hue, it gave her an air of peculiar appropriateness to the scene—as of a wood-nymph, who bore the colors of the forest-trees from which she sprang.

Such, at any rate, was the fancy of a man whose canoe came shooting down the river at this moment, like an arrow from a bow. He slackened pace as he came near the Rectory garden, and peered through the tangled branches which surrounded the old black boat-house, to catch another glimpse of Lettice. He wondered that she did not notice him: his red and white blazer and jaunty cap made him a somewhat conspicuous object in this quiet country place; and she must have heard the long strokes of his oars. But she remained silent, apparently examining the fastenings of the boat; absorbed and tranquil, with a happy smile upon her lips.

"Good afternoon, Miss Campion: can I help you there in any way?" he shouted at last, letting his boat slide past the boat-house entrance, and then bringing it round to the little flight of grassy steps cut in the bank from the lawn to the river.

"Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Dalton. Thank you, no; I don't want any help," said Lettice; but the young man had already set foot upon the lawn and was advancing towards her. He was the nephew and heir of the childless Squire at Angleford Manor, and he occasionally spent a few weeks with his uncle in the country. Old Mr. Dalton was not fond of Angleford, however, and the Campions did not see much of him and his nephew.

Brooke Dalton was six-and-twenty, a manly, well-looking young fellow, with fair hair and bright blue eyes. He was not very tall, and had already begun to develop a tendency towards stoutness, which gave him considerable trouble in after years. At present he kept it down by heavy doses of physical exercise, so that it amounted only to a little unusual fullness of body and the suspicion of a double chin. His enemies called him fat. His friends declared that his sunshiny look of prosperity and good-humor was worth any amount of beauty, and that it would be a positive loss to the world if he were even a trifle thinner. And Brooke Dalton was a man of many friends.

Lettice greeted him with a smile. "So you are here again," she said.

"Yes, I've been here a day or two. Have you heard from Sydney yet?"

"No, and we are dreadfully anxious. But papa says we shall hear very soon now."

"I don't suppose you need have the slightest anxiety. Sydney is sure to do well: he was always a clever fellow."

"Yes, but he has had no teaching except from papa: and papa torments himself with the idea that there may be better teachers than himself at Cambridge—which I am sure there couldn't be. And I am sure he will be disappointed if Sydney does not get at least an exhibition, although he tries to pretend that he will not mind."

"If he does not get it this year, he will be the surer of it next time."

"Yes," said Lettice rather doubtfully. "But I wish papa were not quite so anxious."

"Did he go to Cambridge with Sydney?"

"Yes, and stayed for a day or two; but he said he was rather glad to get home again—there had been so many changes since he was there."

"Here he comes," said Brooke, turning round.

The rector was a dignified-looking man, with a tall figure, handsome features, and hair and beard which had of late been growing very grey. He greeted Dalton cordially, and at once began to speak of his hopes and expectations for his son. To all of these Dalton responded good-humoredly. "Sydney has plenty of brains: he is is sure to do well," he said.

"Oh, I don't know—I don't know. I've been his only tutor, and I may not have laid the foundations with sufficient care. I shall not be at all surprised if he fails. Indeed"—with a transparent affectation of indifference—"I shall not be sorry to have him back for another year. He is not quite eighteen, you know. And Lettice will be glad to have him again."

"But I want him to succeed!" said Lettice eagerly.

"Of course you do. And he *will* succeed," said Brooke; an assurance which caused her to flash a glad look of gratitude to him in reply.

"Lettice has been Sydney's companion in his studies," said Mr. Campion, patting her hand gently with his long white fingers. "She has been very industrious and has got on very well, but I daresay she will be pleased to have a holiday when he is gone."

"Yes, I daresay," said Brooke; and then, looking at Lettice, he saw the manifestation of some strong feeling which he did not understand. The girl flushed hotly and withdrew her hand from her father's arm. The tears suddenly came into her eyes.

"I never wanted a holiday," she said, in a hurt tone.

"No, no, you were always a good girl," returned her father absently—his eyes had wandered away from her to the high-road beyond the glebe. "But of course there is a limit to a girl's powers; she can't compete with a boy beyond a certain point. Is not that a cab, Lettice? Surely it must be Sydney, and he has came at last. Well, now we shall know the result!"

"I'll go to the fence and look," said Lettice, running away. The tears of mortification and distress were still smarting in her eyes. Why should her father depreciate her to their neighbor because she was a girl? She did not mind Mr. Dalton's opinion of her, but it was hard that her father should give her no credit for the work that she had done in the study at his side. Step by step she had kept pace with her brother: sometimes he had excelled her, sometimes she thought that she was outstripping him. Now in the hour of his possible success (of which she would be proud and glad), why should her father seem to undervalue her powers and her industry? They would never bring her the guerdon that might fall to Sydney's lot; but she felt that she, too, had a right to her father's praise.

She had been vaguely hurt during Sydney's absence to find that Mr. Campion did not seem disposed to allow her to go on working alone with him. "Wait, my dear, wait," he had said to her, when she came to him as usual, "let us see how Sydney's examination turns out. If he comes back to us for another year you can go on with him. If not—well, you are a girl, it does not matter so much for *you;* and your mother complains that you do not sit with her sufficiently. Take a holiday just now, we will go on when Sydney comes back."

But in this, Lettice's first separation from her beloved brother, she had no heart for a holiday. She would have been glad of hard work to take her out of herself. She was anxious, sad, *désœuvrée*, and if she had not been taught all her life to look on failure in an examination as something disgraceful, she would have earnestly hoped that Sydney might lose the scholarship for which he was competing.

Brooke Dalton saw that his presence was scarcely desired just then, and took his leave, meditating as he pulled up the river on Lettice's reddened cheeks and pretty tear-filled eyes. "I suppose she thinks she'll miss her brother when he goes away," he decided at length, "and no doubt she will, for a time; but it is just as well—what does a girl want with all that Latin and Greek? It will only serve to make her forget to brush her hair and wear a frock becomingly. Of course she's clever, but I should not care for that sort of cleverness in a sister—or a wife." He thought again of the girl's soft grey eyes. But he had a hundred other preoccupations, and her image very soon faded from his brain.

Lettice ran to the fence to look at the cab, but Mr. Campion turned at once to the gateway and walked out into the road. He had not been mistaken, it was Sydney, indeed; and as soon as the young fellow saw his father he stopped the vehicle, told the driver to go on to the Rectory with his portmanteau, and turned to his father with a triumphant smile. Lettice did not meet the pair for a minute or two, so the son's communication was made first to Mr. Campion alone.

"Here I am, sir!" was the young man's greeting, "turned up again like a bad half-penny."

"Welcome anyhow, my boy," said the rector, "and sterling coin, I'll warrant, however much you may malign yourself." He was too nervous to ask a direct question about his son's success. "We have been very dull without you. Lettice is counting on your help to break in her pony to the saddle."

"You mustn't be dull after a week's absence. What would you do if I had to be more than half the year at Cambridge?"

"Ah, that would be a different thing. Have they given you an exhibition then?"

"Well, not exactly that." The rector's face fell, but it brightened as Sydney proceeded with a touch of youthful pomposity. "Your old pupil is a Scholar of Trinity."

The rector was carrying his cane as he walked along, and when Sydney had told his good news he stopped short, his face aglow, and for lack of any more eloquent mode of expressing his satisfaction, raised it in the air and brought it down with sounding emphasis on his companion's back.

Sydney laughed.

"Laudatur et alget," he said. "How many stripes would it have been if I had come home disgraced?"

"The stripes would have been my portion in that case," the rector answered, with a hearty laugh. He had not been so jovial for many months.

Then Lettice came running up, and had to be told the news, and clung to Sydney's neck with kisses, which he graciously permitted rather than returned. But he was gratified by her affection, as well as by the pride and pleasure which his father took in his success, and the less discriminating, but equally warm congratulations and caresses showered upon him by his mother.

Indeed for the rest of the day, Sydney was caressed and complimented to his heart's content. He preferred the compliments to the caresses, and he was not unloving to his parents, although he repulsed Lettice when she attempted to kiss him more than once. He had come back from Cambridge with an added sense of manliness and importance, which did not sit ill upon his handsome face and the frank confidence of his manner. It was Sydney who had inherited the golden hair and regular features which, as his mother said, ought to have belonged to Lettice and not to him; but she loved him all the more dearly for his resemblance to her family and to herself. It escaped her observation that Sydney's blue-grey eyes were keener, his mouth more firmly closed and his jaw squarer than those of most boys or men, and betokened, if physiognomy goes for anything, a new departure in character and intellect from the ways in which Mrs. Campion and her family had always walked. A fair, roseate complexion, and a winning manner, served to disguise these points of difference ; and Mrs. Campion had not quick sight for anything which did not lie upon the surface, in the character of those with whom she had to do.

She was usually to be found in the drawing-room—a faded, pretty woman, little over fifty years of age, but with the delicate and enfeebled air of the semi-invalid—a white shawl round her shoulders, a bit of knitting or embroidery between her incapable, uncertain fingers. Her hair was very grey, but the curliness had never gone out of it, and it sprang so crisply and picturesquely from her white, unwrinkled forehead that it seemed a pity to hide any of the pretty waves even by the crown of fine old lace which Mrs. Campion loved. She was a woman at whom no one could look without a sense of artistic satisfaction, for her face was still charming, and her dress delicately neat and becoming. As for her mental and moral qualities, she was perfectly well satisfied with them, and her husband was as satisfied as she—although from a somewhat different point of view. And as she very properly remarked, if her husband were satisfied with her, she did not know why she should be called upon to regard any adverse opinion of the outer world. At the same time she was an ardent disciple of Mrs. Grundy.

How this woman came to be the mother of a child like Lettice, it were, indeed, hard to say. Sydney was fashioned more or less after Mrs. Campion's own heart : he was brisk, practical, unimaginative—of a type that she to some extent understood ; but Lettice with her large heart, her warm and passionate nature, her keen sensibilities and tender conscience, was a continual puzzle to her mother. Especially at this period of the girl's life, when new powers were developing and new instincts coming into existence—the very time when a girl most needs the help and comfort of a mother's tender comprehension—Mrs. Campion and Lettice fell hopelessly apart. Lettice's absorption in her studies did not seem right in Mrs. Campion's eyes : she longed with all her soul to set her daughter down to crewel-work and fancy knitting, and her one comfort in view of Sydney's approaching separation from his home was her hope that, when he was gone, Lettice would give up Latin and Greek and become like other girls. She was ignorantly proud of Sydney's successes: she was quite as ignorantly ashamed of Lettice's achievements in the same lines of study.

"I can never forget," she said to Lettice that evening, when the rector and his son were discussing Cambridge and examination papers in the study, while the mother and her daughter occupied the drawing-room—Lettice, indeed, wild to join her father and brother in the study and glean every possible fragment of information concerning the place which she had been taught to reverence, but far too dutiful to her mother to leave her alone when Mrs. Campion seemed inclined to talk—"I can never forget that Sydney learned his alphabet at my knee. I taught him to spell, at any rate; and if your father had not insisted on taking the teaching out of my hands when he was seven years old, I am convinced that I should have done great things with him."

"Surely he has done great things already, mamma!" Lettice said with enthusiasm.

"Oh, yes!" said Mrs. Campion with a sigh. "But I don't think your father has given quite the bias to his mind that I should have liked best. I have always hoped that he would spend his strength in the service of the Church; but—— You have not heard him say much about his future career, have you, Lettice?"

"I don't think he has considered it particularly," Lettice answered. "But he never speaks of taking Orders; he talked of the Bar the other day. There's no reason why he should make up his mind so soon, is there, mamma?"

"No, dear, no. But I am quite sure that if he went into the Church he would be a Bishop," said Mrs. Campion, with conviction. "And I should like him to be a Bishop."

"Well, perhaps he will be Lord Chancellor instead," said Lettice, merrily.

"There can be no doubt, my dear," said her mother, "that a Bishop of the Anglican Church is able to carry himself with more dignity and distinction in everyday life than a Lord Chancellor, who is only dignified when he is on the Bench. I think that Sydney would make an excellent Bishop—quite the most distinguished Bishop of the day."

It was not until next morning that Lettice had time to ply her brother with questions as to his examination and his Cambridge experiences generally. She did not ask about the visit to London which he had also paid. She had been to London herself, and could go there any day. But Cambridge!—the goal of Sydney's aspirations—the place where (the girl believed) intellectual success or failure was of such paramount importance—what was that like?

Sydney was ready to hold forth. He liked the position of instructor, and was not insensible to the flattery of Lettice's intentness on his answers. But he was a little dismayed by one of her questions, which showed the direction of her thoughts.

"Did you hear anything about the women's college, Sydney?" For Girton and Newnham were less well known then than they are now.

"Women's colleges! No, indeed. At least, I heard them laughed at several times. They're no good."

"Why not?" said Lettice, wistfully.

"Now, Lettice," said the youthful mentor, severe in boyish wisdom, "I hope you are not going to take fancies into your head about going to Cambridge yourself. I should not like it at all. I'm not going to have *my* sister laughed at and sneered at every time she walks out. I don't want to be made a laughing-stock. Nice girls stay at home with their mothers; they don't go to colleges and make themselves peculiar."

"I am not going to be peculiar; but I don't want to forget all I have learned with you," said Lettice, quickly.

"You have learned too much already," said the autocrat, whose views concerning women's education had developed since his short stay in Cambridge. "Girls don't want Latin and Greek; they want music and needlework, and all that sort of thing. I don't want my sister to be a blue-stocking."

Lettice felt that her lot in life ought not to be settled for her simply as Sydney's sister—that she had an individuality of her own. But the feeling was too vague to put into words; and after Syndey had left her, in obedience to a call from his father, she sat on in the long, low room with its cushioned window-seats and book-covered walls—the dear old room in which she had spent so many happy hours with her teacher and her fellow-pupil—and wondered what would become of her when Sydney was really gone; whether all those happy days were over, and she must henceforth content herself with a life at Mrs. Campion's side, where it was high treason to glance at any book that was neither a devotional work nor a novel. Lettice loved her mother, but the prospect did not strike her as either brilliant or cheering.

It was the beginning, although at first she knew it not, of a new era in her life. Her happy childhood was over; she was bound henceforth to take up the heavy burden which custom lays on the shoulders of so many women: the burden of trivial care, unchanging routine, petty conventionalities—

> "Heavy as frost and deep almost as life."

Sydney went out into the world to fight; Lettice sat in idleness at home; and society, as well as the rector and his wife, judged this division of labor to be fair and right. But to Lettice, whose courage was high and whose will and intellect were strong, it seemed a terrible injustice that she might not fight and labor too. She longed for expansion: for a wider field and sharper weapons wherewith to contest the battle; and she longed in vain. During her father's lifetime it became more and more impossible for her to leave home. She was five-and-twenty before she breathed a larger air than that of Angleford.

CHAPTER III.

PROGRESS.

In due time, Sydney proceeded to Cambridge, and Lettice was left alone. The further development of brother and sister can scarcely be understood without a retrospective glance at their own and their parents' history.

The Reverend Lawrence Campion, Rector of Angleford, was at this time a prosperous and contented man. Before he reached his fortieth year, he had been presented by an old college friend to a comfortable living. Married to the woman of his early choice, he had become the father of two straight-limbed, healthy, and intelligent children; and then, for another twenty years, he felt that he would not care to change his lot with that of the most enviable of his fellow-creatures.

Being himself a scholar and a student, he determined that his boy and girl, so far as he could shape their lives, should be scholars also. To teach them all he knew was henceforth his chief occupation; for he would not hand over to another a task which for him was a simple labor of love. Day by day he sat between them in his comfortable study, where roses tapped at the lozenge-shaped window panes all through the summer, and in winter the glow of the great logs upon the hearth was reflected from the polished binding and gilt lettering of his books in a thousand autumnal hues, as pleasing to his eyes as the tints of the summer flowers. Day by day he sat between his children, patiently laying the foundation of all they could thereafter learn or know. He made no distinction for age or sex; and in their case, at any rate, nature had set no stigma of inferiority on the intelligence of the girl. Sydney was the older of the two by eighteen months, and at first it seemed as though his mind was readier to grasp a new idea; but there awoke in Lettice a spirit of generous rivalry and resolution, which saved her from being far outstripped by her brother. Together they studied Greek and Latin; they talked French and read German; they picked up as much of mathematics as their father could explain to them—which was little enough; and, best of all, they developed a literary faculty such as does not always accompany a knowledge of half-a-dozen dead and living languages.

The day came when Mr. Campion, not without misgiving, resolved to test the value of the education which he had given to his children. He had held a fellowship at Peterhouse up to the time of his marriage, and had intended that Sydney should try for a scholarship at the same college. But the boy aimed at a higher mark; he was bent on being a Scholar of Trinity. Perhaps it might have done him good to fail once or twice on the threshold of his life, and his father assured himself beforehand that he would not be disappointed if his pupil was sent back to him for another year of preparation. But, as we have already seen, Sydney succeeded, and, if the truth must be told, Mr. Campion was in no way surprised at his success.

From that time forward none of the Campions ever dreamed of failure in connection with Sydney's efforts. He certainly did not dream of failure for himself. He had that sublime confidence which swells the heart of every young man in the flush of his first victory. We laugh in the middle age at the ambitions which we nursed at twenty; but we did not laugh when the divine breath was in us, and when our faith removed mountains of difficulty from our path.

Sydney's career at Cambridge was one long triumph. He gained the Craven and Porson scholarships; his epigrams were quoted by college tutors as models of vigor and elegance; he was President of the Union; he took an excellent degree, and was elected to a fellowship in due course. He had, in fact, done brilliant things; and at the age of twenty-four he was—to those who knew him best, and especially to those who liked him least—that shining, glorified, inspired, and yet sophisticated product of modern university culture, an academic prig. The word is not of necessity a term of reproach. Perhaps we are all prigs at some season in our lives, if we happen to have any inherent power of doing great things. There are lovable prigs, who grow into admirable men and women; but, alas! for the prig whose self-love coils round him like a snake, until it crushes out the ingenuous fervor of youth, and perverts the noblest aspirations of manhood!

From Cambridge Sydney went to London, and was called to the bar. Here, of course, his progress was not so rapid. Briefs do not come for wishing, nor even for merit alone. Nevertheless he was advancing year by year in the estimation of good judges; and it was known to his father, and to his intimate friends, that he only waited a favorable opportunity to stand for a seat in parliament.

At Angleford, in the meantime, they watched his career with proud hearts and loving sympathy. Mrs. Campion, in particular, doted on her son. She even scanned the paper every morning, never by any chance missing an item of law intelligence, where occasionally she would be rewarded by coming across Sydney's name. She would not have considered any distinction, however great, to be more than his due.

Lettice never thought of disagreeing with her mother when she sang the praises of Sydney; but it must be confessed that both the rector and his wife displayed less than their ordinary balance of judgment in discussing the merits of their son. They unconsciously did much injustice to the girl, by their excessive adulation of her brother, and her interests were constantly sacrificed to his. She would have been the last to admit that it was so; but the fact was clear enough to the few persons who used to visit them at Angleford. Her friend, Clara Graham, for instance, the wife of a London journalist, who came down now and then to spend a holiday in her native village, would attempt to commiserate Lettice on the hardness of her lot; but Lettice would not listen to anything of the kind. She was too loyal to permit a word to be spoken in her presence which might seem to reflect upon her parents or her brother.

Yet it would have been impossible that she should not be in some way affected by the change which had come over her life since Sydney went to Cambridge. From that day her regular reading with her father had ceased, and she was left to direct her studies as she thought best. Mr. Campion was almost entirely absorbed in the prospects of his son, and if Lettice needed his assistance she had to ask for it, often more than once. The consequence was that she soon gave up asking, and her mind, left to its own devices, gradually found its true bent. She did not read much more Latin or Greek, but devoured all the Modern literature that came in her way. After that she began to write—not fiction in the first instance, but more or less solid essays in criticism and social philosophy, following the pattern of certain writers in the half-crown monthly magazines, which her father was wont to take in. If she had known that the time would come when she would have to earn her living by her pen, she could scarcely have adopted a better plan to prepare herself for the task.

In the first instance, whatever she did in this way had been for her own pleasure and distraction, without any clear idea of turning her abilities to practical account. She had no inclination for an idle life, but there was a limited period during which it rested with her father to say what her occupation as a woman should be. When Sidney went to Cambridge, Lettice had entreated that she might be sent to Girton or Newnham; but the young Scholar of Trinity had fought shy of the notion, and it was dropped at once. That, indeed, was the beginning of Lettice's isolation—the beginning of a kind of mental estrangement from her brother, which the lapse of time was to widen and perpetuate.

Mr. Campion and his wife were by no means unkind to their daughter; they simply put Sydney first in all their plans and anticipations of the future. Her education was supposed to be complete; her lot was to be cast at home, and not in the rough outer world, where men compete and struggle for the mastery. If she had complained, they might not have been shocked, but they would have been immeasurably astonished. The rector had given her an excellent training, and though his strongest motive was the desire to stimulate and encourage his son, no doubt he had her interests in view at the same time. But when he finished with Sydney he finished with Lettice, and it never occurred to him that there was any injustice in suddenly withdrawing from her the arm on which he had taught her to lean.

She did not complain. Yet as time went on she could not shut her eyes to Sydney's habit of referring every question to the test of personal expediency. It was her first great disillusion, but the pain which it caused her was on her parents' behalf rather than on her own. They were the chief sufferers; they gave him so much and received so little in return. To be sure, Sydney was only what they had made him. They bade him "take," in language which he could easily understand, but their craving for love, for tenderness, for a share in his hopes, ambitions, resolutions, and triumphs, found no entrance to his understanding.

Sydney had spent a large sum of money at Cambridge, and had left heavy debts behind him, although his father had paid without remonstrance all the accounts which he suffered to reach the old man's hands. He had what are called expensive tastes; in other words, he bought what he coveted, and did not count the cost. The same thing went on in London, and Mr. Campion soon found that his income, good as it was, fell short of the demands which were made upon it.

The rector himself had always been a free spender. His books, his pictures, his garden, his mania for curiosities, had run away with thousands of pounds, and now, when he surreptitiously tried to convert these things into cash again there was a woeful falling off in their value. He knew nothing of the art of driving a bargain; and, where others would have made a profit with the same opportunities, he invariably lost money. He had bought badly to begin with, and he sold disastrously. Being hard pressed on one occasion for a hundred pounds to send to Sydney, he borrowed it of a perfect stranger, who took for his security what would have sufficed to cover ten times the amount.

This was in the third year after Sydney was called to the bar. Lettice was in London that autumn, on a visit to the Grahams; and perhaps something which she contrived to say to her brother induced him to write and tell his father that briefs were coming in at last, and that he hoped to be able to dispense with further remittances from home. Mr. Campion rejoiced in this assurance as though it implied that Sydney had made his fortune. But things had gone too far with him to admit of recovery, even if the young man had kept to his good resolutions—which he did not.

The fact is that Sydney's college debts hung like a weight round his neck, and he had made no effort to be rid of them. The income of his fellowship and his professional earnings ought to have been ample for all his needs, and no excuse can be urged for the selfishness which made him a burden to his father after he had left Cambridge. But chambers in Piccadilly, as well as at the Inner Temple, a couple of West End clubs, a nightly rubber at whist, and certain regular drains upon his pocket which never found their way into any book of accounts, made up a formidable total of expenditure by the year's end. He was too clever a man of the world to let his reputation—or even his conscience—suffer by his self-indulgence, and, if he lived hard in the pursuit of pleasure, he also worked hard in his profession. In short, he was a well-reputed lawyer, against whom no one had a word to say; and he was supposed to have a very good chance of the prizes which are wont to fall to the lot of successful lawyers.

At the beginning of 1880, when Sydney Campion was in his twenty-seventh year, there came to him the opportunity for which he had waited. Mr. Disraeli had dissolved Parliament somewhat suddenly, and appealed to the country for a renewal of the support accorded to him six years before. He had carried out in Eastern Europe a policy worthy of an Imperial race. He had brought peace with honor from Berlin, filled the bazaars of three continents with rumors of his fame, and annexed the Suez Canal. He had made his Queen an Empress, and had lavished garters and dukedoms on the greatest of Her Majesty's subjects. But the integrity of the empire, safe from foes without, was threatened on either shore of St. George's Channel—by malignant treason on one side, and on the other by exuberant verbosity. It was a moment big with the fate of humanity—and he strongly advised the constituencies to make him Prime Minister again.

Then the country was plunged into the turmoil of a General Election. Every borough and shire which had not already secured candidates hastened to do so. Zealous Liberals and enthusiastic Tories ran up to town from the places where local spirit failed, or local funds were not forthcoming, convinced that they would find no lack of either in the clubs and associations of the metropolis. Young and ambitious politicians had their chance at last, and amongst others the chance came for Sydney Campion.

There is no difficulty about getting into Parliament for a young man who has friends. He can borrow the money, the spirit, the eloquence, the political knowledge, and he will never be asked to repay any of them out of his own resources. Now Sydney had a friend who would have seen him through the whole business on these terms, who would at any rate have found him money, the only qualification in which he was deficient. But he fell into a trap prepared for him by his own vanity, and, as it happened, the mistake cost him very dear.

"You see, Campion," his friend had said to him, after suggesting that he should go down as Conservative candidate for Dormer, "our people know very well what they would get for their money if you were elected. You would make your mark in the first session, and be immensely useful to us in ever so many ways."

"Would it cost much?" asked Sydney, rather nettled by the mention of money. He had known Sir John Pynsent at Cambridge, and had never allowed himself to be outdressed or outshone by him in any way. But Pynsent had beaten him in the race for political honors; and Sydney, like a showy player at billiards who prefers to put side on when he might make a straightforward stroke, resolved to take a high tone with his would-be patronizing friend.

"Much?" said Sir John. "Well, no, not much, as things go. But these worthies at Dormer have their own traditional ways of working the oracle. The Rads have got hold of a stockjobber who is good for a thousand, and Maltman says they cannot fight him with less than that. The long and short of it is that they want a strong candidate with five hundred pounds, and we are prepared to send you down, my boy, and to be good for that amount."

Sydney took out his cigar case, and offered the beaming baronet a choice Villar.

"It's uncommonly good of you, Pynsent, to give me a look in at Dormer, and to suggest the other thing in such a friendly way. Now, look here—can you let me have two days to say yes or no to Maltman?"

"I am afraid I can't. He must have his answer in twenty-four hours."

"Well, say twenty-four hours. He shall have it by this time to-morrow. And as for the five hundred, you may be wanting that by and by. Keep it for some fellow who is not in a position to fight for his own hand."

Sir John Pynsent left his friend with a greatly increased opinion of his spirit and professional standing—a result of the interview with which Sydney was perfectly satisfied.

Then came the serious question, how he was to deal with the emergency which had arisen—perhaps the most critical emergency of his life. Within twenty-four hours he must know when and how he could put his hand upon five hundred pounds.

He might easily have saved twice the sum before now; but he had never learned the art of saving. He thought of his father, whom he had not seen or written to for more than a month, and determined that he would at all events go down and consult the rector. He had not realized the fact that his father's resources were already exhausted, and that mere humanity, to say nothing of filial duty, required him to come to the old man's assistance, instead of asking him for fresh sacrifices.

"If he has not the money," Sydney said, "no doubt he can help me to raise it. It will be an excellent investment of our joint credit, and a very good thing for us both."

So he telegraphed to Angleford—

"I am going to contest a borough. Must make provision. Shall be with you by next train."

CHAPTER IV.

FATHER AND SON.

SYDNEY'S telegram reached Angleford at an awkward time. Things had been going from bad to worse with Mr. Campion, who had never had as much money as he needed since he paid the last accounts of the Cambridge tradesmen. In the vain hope that matters would mend by and by—though he did not form any precise idea as to how the improvement would take place—he had been meeting each engagement as it came to maturity by entering on another still more onerous. After stripping himself of all his household treasures that could be converted into money, he had pledged his insurance policy, his professional and private income, and at last even his furniture ; and he was now in very deep waters.

A great change had come over him. At sixty, when Sydney took his degree, he was still handsome and upright, buoyant with hope and energy. At sixty-six he was broken, weak, and disheartened. To his wife and daughter, indeed, he was always the same cheerful, gentle, sanguine man, full of courtesy and consideration. In the village he was more beloved than ever, because there was scarcely a man or woman who was not familiar with the nature and extent of his troubles. In a country parish the affairs of the parson, especially when they do not prosper, are apt to become the affairs of the congregation as well Who should know better than a man's butcher and baker when the supply of ready money runs short, when one month would be more convenient than another for the settlement of a bill, or when the half-year's stipend has been forestalled and appropriated long before it fell due ?

However great his trouble, the rector had generally contrived to put a good face on things. He considered his difficulties as entirely the result of his own improvidence, and rejoiced to think that Sydney's position was assured, no matter what might happen to himself. Yet often in the silence of the night he would toss upon his restless bed, or vex his soul with complicated accounts in the privacy of his study, and none but the two faithful women who lived with him suspected what he suffered in his weakest moments.

He had come to lean more and more constantly on the companionship of Lettice. Mrs. Campion had never been the kind of woman to whom a man looks for strength or consolation, and when she condoled with her husband he usually felt himself twice as miserable as before. Some wives have a way of making their condolences sound like reproaches; and they may be none the less loving wives for that. Mrs. Campion sincerely loved her husband, but she never thoroughly understood him.

When the boy arrived with Sydney's telegram, Lettice intercepted him at the door. She was accustomed to keep watch over everything that entered the house, and saved her father a great deal of trouble by reading his letters, and, if need be, by answering them. What he would have done without her, he was wont to aver, nobody could tell.

Time had dealt gently with Lettice, in spite of her anxieties, in spite of that passionate revolt against fate which from time to time had shaken her very soul. She was nearly five-and-twenty, and she certainly looked no more then twenty-one. The sweet country air had preserved the delicate freshness of her complexion: her dark grey eyes were clear, her white brow unlined by trouble, her rippling brown hair shining and abundant. Her slender hands were a little tanned—the only sign that country life had laid upon her—because she was never very careful about wearing gloves when she worked in the garden; but neither tan nor freckle ever appeared upon her face, the bloom of which was tender and refined as that of a briar-rose. The old wistful look of her sweet eyes remained unchanged, but the mouth was sadder in repose than it had been when she was a child. When she smiled however, there could not have been a brighter face.

Notwithstanding this touch of sadness on her lips, and a faint shadow of thought on the clear fine brows, the face of Lettice was noticeable for its tranquillity. No storm of passion had ever troubled those translucent eyes: patience sat there, patience and reflection; emotion waited its turn. One could not doubt her capabilities of feeling; but, in spite of her four-and-twenty years, the depths of her heart had never yet been stirred. She had lived a somewhat restricted life, and there was yet very much for her to experience and to learn. Who would be her teacher? For Lettice was not the woman to go ignorant of life's fullest bliss and deepest sorrow to the grave.

She looked particularly slender and youthful as she stood that day at the hall window when Sydney's telegram arrived. She had a double reason for keeping guard in the hall and glancing nervously down the carriage-drive that led from the main road to the rectory front. Half-an-hour before, a hard-featured man had swaggered up the avenue, fired off a volley of defiance on the knocker, and demanded to see Mr. Campion.

"What do you want?" said Lettice, who had opened the door and stood boldly facing him.

"I want to see the parson. At once, miss, if you please."

"Perhaps I can do what is necessary, if you will tell me what your business is. You cannot see my father."

"Oh," said the man, with a little more respect. "You are his daughter, are you? Well, if you can do the needful I am sure I have no objection. Three hundred and twenty pound seventeen-and-six"—here he took out a stamped paper and showed it to Lettice. "That's the figure, miss, and if you'll oblige with coin—cheques and promises being equally inconvenient—I don't mind waiting five minutes to accommodate a lady."

"We have not the money in the house," answered Lettice, who had been reading the formidable document, without quite understanding what it meant.

"Ah, that's a pity," said the man. "But I didn't expect it, so I ain't disappointed."

"It shall be sent to you. I will see that you have it—within a week from this date—only go away now, for my father is unwell."

"Very sorry, miss, but I can't go without the money. This business won't wait any longer. The coin or the sticks—those are my orders, and that's my notion of what is fair and right."

"The sticks?" said Lettice faintly.

"The goods—the furniture. This paper is a bill of sale, and as the reverend gentleman doesn't find it convenient to pay, why, of course, my principal is bound to realize the security. Now, miss, am I to see the gentleman, or am I not?"

"Oh no," said Lettice, "it is useless."

"Then what I am going to do," said the man, "is this. I am going to get the vans, and fetch the goods right away. I may be back this afternoon, or I may be back to-morrow morning; but you take my advice, miss. Talk it over with the old gentleman, and raise the money somehow, for it really would go against me to have to sell you up. I'm to be heard of at the 'Chequers,' miss—William Joskins, at your service."

Then he had gone away, and left her alone, and she stood looking through the window at the dreary prospect—thinking, and thinking, and unable to see any light in the darkness.

One thing, at all events, she must do; a message must be sent to Sydney. It would not be just, either to him or to his father, that the extent of the disaster should be any longer concealed. She had just arrived at this determination, and was turning away to write the telegram, when the messenger from the post-office made his appearance.

In five minutes all the house was astir. A visit from Sydney was a rare occurrence, and he must be treated royally, as though he were a king condescending to quarter himself on his loyal subjects—which, indeed, he was. When Lettice went to tell her father the news she found him seated by the fire, pondering gloomily on what the immediate future might have in store for him; but as soon as she showed him Sydney's telegram he sprang to his feet, with straightened body and brightly shining eyes. In one moment he had passed from despondency to the height of exultation.

"Two o'clock," he said, looking at his watch, "and he will be here at five! Dinner must be ready for him by six; and you will take care, Lettice, that everything is prepared as you know he would like to have it. Going into Parliament, is he? Yes, I have always told you that he would. He is a born orator, child; he will serve his country brilliantly—not for place, nor for corrupt motives of any kind, but as a patriot and a Christian, to whom duty is the law of his nature."

"Yes, papa. And you will be satisfied when he is a member of Parliament?"

"So long as Sydney lives, my dear, I know that he will grow in favor with God and man; and so long as I live, I shall watch his course with undiminished joy and satisfaction. What else have we left to live for? Wife!" said the rector, as Mrs. Campion entered the room, "do you know that our boy is to dine with us to-night?"

"Yes, Lawrence, I have seen his telegram; and Mollie is doing all she can at short notice. It will not be the kind of dinner I should like to put before him; but times are changed with us—sadly changed! I hope he will not miss the plate, Lawrence; and as for wine and dessert ——"

"Oh, mother dear," said Lettice, interrupting, "I quite forgot to tell you about my letter this morning. Look here! It contained a cheque for ten pounds, for that article of mine in the *Decade*. I mean to go into Dorminster, and get one or two things we shall be wanting, and I shall probably drive back in Sydney's cab. So you can leave the wine and dessert to me. And, mother dear, be sure you put on your silver-grey poplin, with the Mechlin cap. Nothing suits you half as well!"

Lettice's earnings had sufficed for some years past for her dress and personal expenses; but latterly she had contrived to have a fair margin left for such emergencies as that which had now arisen. She was more than thanked by the gleam of love which lightened the eyes of her parents as she spoke. Even though Sydney was coming, she thought, that smile at any rate was all for her.

So she went into the town and made her purchases, and waited at the station, shivering in the cold March wind, for Sydney's train.

How much should she tell him to begin with? Or should she say nothing till after dinner? How would he take it? How would it affect him? And suppose for a moment that he had to choose between getting into Parliament and rescuing his father from ruin?

Clearly as she saw the worst sides of Sydney's character, yet she loved him well, and was proud of him. How often she had yearned for tenderness in the days gone by! What excuses she had framed for him in her own heart, when he seemed to forget their existence at Angleford for months together! And now, when she had this terrible news to tell him, was it not possible that his heart would be softened by the blow, and that good would come for all of them out of this menaced evil? What a happy place the old Rectory might be if her father's mind were set at rest again, and Sydney would come down and stay with them from time to time!"

The train was at the platform before Lettice had decided what to do. Sydney looked rather surprised to see her, but gave her his cheek to kiss, and hurried her off to the cab stand.

"What brought you here?" he said. "How cold you are! All well at home?"

"Yes, they are well. But, oh, Sydney, they are growing old?"

"Growing old, child? Why, of course they are. We must expect it. Do you mean they look older than they are?"

"Yes—older, and—and more——"

"Well?"

He looked at her sharply, for she could not quite command her voice, and left the sentence unfinished. Then Sydney had an uncomfortable feeling. He saw that there was something amiss, but did not care at the moment to insist on further comfidences. No doubt he would hear all that there was to be said by and by. Meanwhile he turned the conversation, and soon contrived to interest her, so that they reached the Rectory in excellent spirits. All that day poor Lettice alternated between despair and giddy lightness of heart.

So the hero came home and was feasted, and his father and mother did obeisance to him, and even he for an hour or two thought it good that he should now and then renew his contract with the earth from which he sprang, and remember the chains of duty and affection which bound him to the past, instead of dwelling constantly in the present and the future.

Throughout dinner, and at dessert, and as they drank the wine which Lettice had provided, Sydney spoke of his position and prospects, dazzling those who listened to him with his pictures of victory at Dormer, of Conservative triumphs all along the line, of Ministerial favor for himself, of "Office—why not?—within a twelvemonth." It would have been treason for any of his audience to doubt that all these good things would come to pass. If Lettice felt that there was a skeleton at the feast, her father at any rate had forgotten its existence. Or, rather, he saw deliverance at hand. The crisis of his boy's fortune had arrived; and, if Sydney triumphed, nothing that could happen to Sydney's father could rob Mr. Campion of his joy.

At last the women left the room, and Sydney proceeded to tell his father what he wanted. He must return to town by the first train in the morning, having made an appointment with Mr. Maltman for two o'clock. Of course he meant to contest Dormer; but it was desirable that he should know for certain that he could raise five hundred pounds within a week, to supplement his own narrow means.

His face fell a little when his father confessed—as though it were clearly a matter for shame and remorse—that he could not so much as draw a cheque for twenty pounds. But, in fact, he was not surprised. Recklessly as he had abstained from inquiring into the old man's affairs since Lettice spoke to him in London two years ago, he had taken it for granted that there were difficulties of some kind; and men in difficulties do not keep large balances at their bankers'.

"Well, father," he said, "I am sorry for that. Yes—it certainly makes the thing rather hard for me. I hoped you might have seen me fairly launched on my career; and then, you know, if the worst came to the worst, I could soon have repaid you what you advanced. Well, what I suggest is this. I can probably borrow the money with your assistance, and I want to know what security we could offer between us for the loan."

Mr. Campion looked mournfully at his son, but he was not ready with a reply.

"You see," said Sydney, "it would never do for me to miss this chance. Everything depends upon it, and I was bound to refuse Pynsent's offer of the money. But if you have something that we can lodge as security——"

Mr. Campion shook his head. The look of distress that came upon his face might have softened Sydney's heart, if he had been less intent on his object.

"There will be an insurance policy I suppose?"

"No, my boy! The fact is, I was obliged to assign it a few years ago, to cover a former engagement."

"Dear me!" said Sydney, in a tone of vexation, "what a nuisance! I am afraid our signatures alone would hardly suffice. A bill of sale is out of the question, for that would have to be registered."

Something in the old man's appearance, as he sank back in his chair and wrung his hands, struck Sydney with a sudden conviction. He sprang to his feet, and came close to his father's side, standing over him in what looked almost like an attitude of menace.

"Good heaven!" he cried. "Don't tell me that it has gone so far as that!"

The door opened, and Lettice stood before them, with pale cheeks and glistening eyes. She had guessed what would come of their conversation, and had held herself in readiness to intervene.

Sydney turned upon her at once.

"You," he said, as deliberate now as he had been excited a minute before, "you, with your fine head for business, will doubtless know as much about this as anybody. Has my father given a bill of sale on his furniture?"

"He has," said Lettice.

"When?"

"Months ago. I must have known it, for I read all his correspondence; but I hardly knew what a bill of sale meant. And Sydney," she continued, laying her hand on his arm, and whispering so that her father should not hear, "it may be only a threat, but a man was here this morning, who said he should come to-morrow and take the things away."

When he heard this, Sydney lost his self-command, and spoke certain words for which he never quite forgave himself. No doubt the blow was a heavy one, and he realized immediately all that it implied. But he did not foresee the effect of the harsh and bitter words which he flung at his father and sister, charging them with reckless extravagance, and declaring that their selfishness had ruined his whole career.

Lettice was stung to the quick, not so much by her brother's unjust accusations as by the suffering which they inflicted on her father. His childishness had increased upon him so much of late that he was in truth, at this moment, more like a boy under correction than a father in presence of his children. He buried his face in his hands, and Lettice heard a piteous groan.

Then she stood beside him, laid her arm upon his neck, and faced Sydney with indignant eyes.

"Look!" she said. "This is your work. Can you not see and understand? You accuse him of selfishness—him, whose life has been one long sacrifice for you! I tell you, Sydney, that your cruel neglect, your ingrained love of self, have dragged our father down to this. He gave you all that you have, and made you all that you are, and when you should have come to his succor, and secured for him a happy old age, you have left him all these years to struggle with the poverty to which you reduced him. He never murmured—he will never blame you as long as he lives—he is as proud of you to-day as he was ten years ago—and you dare, you *dare* to reproach him!"

Lettice ended in magnificent wrath; and, then, being a woman after all, she knelt by her father's side and burst into tears.

If Sydney's pride had not got the better of him he would have owned the justice of her words, and all might have been well. Instead of that, he went to his room, brooding upon his misfortune, and soothing his wounded feelings in an intense self-pity.

And next morning, when he came remorsefully to his father's bedside, intending to assure him that he would make it the first business of his life to rescue him from his difficulties, he found him rescued indeed, with placid face and silent heart, over which the cares of earth had no further dominion.

CHAPTER V.

SEVERANCE.

The rector's death was a terrible shock to Sydney. For a time his remorse for his own conduct was very great, and it bore good fruit in a perceptible softening of his over-confident manner and a more distinct show of consideration for his mother and sister. Little by little he drew from Lettice the story of her past anxieties, of his father's efforts and privations, of his mother's suffering at the loss of luxuries to which she had always been accustomed—suffering silently borne because it was borne for Sydney. Lettice spared him as far as she could; but there was much that she was obliged to tell, as she had been for so long the depositary of her father's secrets and his cares. Man-like, Sydney showed his sorrow by exceeding sharpness of tone.

"Why did you not write to me? Why was I never told?"

"I told you as much as I dared, when I was in London."

"As much as you *dared?*"

"Dear father would not let me tell very much. He laid his commands on me to say nothing."

"You should have disobeyed him," said Sydney marching up and down the darkened study, in which this conference took place. "It was your duty to have disobeyed him, for his own good——"

"Oh, Sydney, how can you talk to me of duty?" said Lettice, with a sob. "Why did you not come and see for yourself? Why did you stay away so long?"

The reproach cut deeper than she knew. "I thought I was acting for the best," said the young man, half defiantly, half apologetically. "I did what it was the desire of his heart that I should do— But you, you were at home; you saw it all, and you should have told me, Lettice."

"I did try," she answered meekly, "but it was not very easy to make you listen."

In other circumstances he would, perhaps, have retorted angrily; and Lettice felt that it said much for the depth of his sorrow for the past that he did not carry his self-defence any further. By and by he paused in his agitated walk up and down the room, with head bent and hands plunged deep into his pockets. After two or three moments' silence, Lettice crept up to him and put her hand within his arm.

"Forgive me, Sydney, I spoke too bitterly; but it has been very hard sometimes."

"I would have helped if I had known," said Sydney gloomily.

"I know you would, dear. And he always knew it, too. That was the reason why he told me to keep silence—for fear of hampering you in your career. He has often said to me that he wished to keep the knowledge of his difficulties from you, because he knew you would be generous and kind——"

Tears choked her voice. Her brother, who had hitherto been quite unresponsive to her caresses, put out his right hand and stroked the trembling fingers that rested on his left arm. He was leaning against the old oak table, where his father's books and papers had stood for so many years; and some remembranee of bygone days when he and Lettice, as boy and girl, sat together with their grammars and lexicons at that very place, occurred a little dimly to his mind. But what was a dim memory to him was very clear and distinct to Lettice.

"Oh, Sydney, do you remember how we used to work here with father?" she broke out. "How many hours we spent here together—reading the same books, thinking the same thoughts—and now we seem so divided, so very far apart! You have not quite forgotten those old days, have you?"

"No, I have not forgotten them," said Sydney, in a rather unsteady voice. Poor Lettice! She had counted for very little in his life for the last few years, and yet, as she reminded him, what companions they had been before he went to Cambridge! A suddenly roused instinct of compassion and protection caused him to put his arm round her and to speak with unusual tenderness.

"I won't forget those old times, Lettice. Perhaps we shall be able to see more of each other by and bye than we have done lately. You have been a good girl, never wanting any change or amusement all these years; but I'll do my best to look after you now."

"I began to think you did not care for any of us, Sydney."

"Nonsense," said Sydney, and he kissed her forehead affectionately before he left the study, where, indeed, he felt that he had stayed a little too long, and given Lettice an unusual advantage over him. He was not destitute of natural affections, but they had so long been obscured by the mists of selfishness that he found it difficult to let them appear—and more difficult with his sister than with his mother. Lettice seemed to him to exact too much, to be too intense in feeling, too critical in observation. He was fond of her, but she was not at all his ideal woman—if he had one. Sydney's preference was for what he called "a womanly woman": not one who knew Greek.

He made a brave and manly effort to wind up his father's affairs and pay his outstanding debts. He was so far stirred out of himself that it hardly occurred to his mind that a slur would be left on him if these debts were left unpaid: his strongest motive just now was the sense of right and wrong, and he knew, too late, that it was right for him to take up the load which his own acts had made so heavy.

The rector had died absolutely penniless. His insurance policy, his furniture, the whole of his personal effects, barely sufficed to cover the money he had borrowed. What Sydney did was to procure the means of discharging at once all the household bills, and the expenses connected with the funeral.

"And now," he said to Lettice, when the last of these dues had been paid off and they took their last stroll together through the already half dismantled rooms of the desolate old Rectory, "I feel more of a man than I have felt since that terrible night, and I want to get back to my work."

"I am afraid you will have to work very hard, dear!" said Lettice, laying her hand on his arm, rather timidly. How she still yearned for the full measure of mutual confidence and sympathy!

"Hard work will be good for me," he said, his keen blue eyes lighting up as if with ardor for the fray. "I shall soon wipe off old scores, and there's nothing like knowing you have only yourself to look to. My practice, you know, is pretty good already, and it will be very good by and bye."

"I am so glad!"

"Yes. And, of course, you must never have any anxiety about mother and yourself. I shall see to all that. You are going to stay with the Grahams for a while, so I can come over one day and discuss it. I don't suppose I shall ever marry, but whether I do or not, I shall always set apart a certain sum for mother and you."

"I have been thinking about the future," said Lettice, quietly. She always spoke in a low, musical voice, without gesture, but not without animation, producing on those who heard her the impression that she had formed her opinions beforehead, and was deliberate in stating them. "Do you know, Sydney, that I can earn a very respectable income?"

"Earn an income! You!" he said, with a wrinkle in his forehead, and a curl in his nostrils. "I will not hear of such a thing. I cannot have my sister a dependent in other people's houses—a humble governess or companion. How could you dream of it!"

"I have not dreamed of that," said Lettice. "I do not think I should like it myself. I simply stay at home and write. I earned seventy pounds last year, and Mr. Graham says I could almost certainly earn twice as much if I were living in London."

"Why was I not told of this?" said Sydney, with an air of vexation. "What do you write?"

"Essays, and now and then a review, and little stories."

"Little stories—ouf!" he muttered, in evident disgust. "You don't put your name to these things!"

"I did to one article, last March, in *The Decade*."

"That is Graham's magazine, and I daresay Graham asked you to sign your name. When I see him I shall tell him it was done without sufficient consideration."

"All articles are signed in *The Decade*," said Lettice. She did not think it worth while to mention that Graham had written her a very flattering letter about her article, telling her that it had attracted notice—that the critics said she had a style of her own, and was likely to make her mark. The letter had reached her on the morning before her father's death, and she had found but a brief satisfaction in it at the time.

"I think you had better not say anything to Mr. Graham," she continued. "They have both been very kind, and we shall not have too many friends in London."

"Why do you want to live in London?"

"I think I should like it, and mother would like it too. You know she has fifty pounds a year of her own, and if what Mr. Graham says is right we shall be able to live very comfortably."

"I can't say I like this writing for a living," he said.

"I suppose we cannot have everything as we like it. And, besides, I do like it. It is congenial work, and it makes me feel independent."

"It is not always good for women to be independent. It is dangerous."

She laughed—a pleasant little rallying laugh.

"I hope you will not be shocked," she said. "I have set my heart on being perfectly independent of you and everybody else."

He saw that she would have her way, and let the subject drop.

A few weeks afterwards, Lettice and her mother had packed up their belongings and went to London. The Grahams were delighted to have them, for Lettice was a great favorite with both. James Graham was a literary man of good standing, who, in addition to editing *The Decade*, wrote for one of the weekly papers, and reviewed books in his special lines for one of the dailies. By dint of hard work, and carefully nursing his connection, he contrived to make a living; and that was all. Literary work is not well paid as a rule. There is fair pay to be had on the staff of the best daily papers, but that kind of work requires a special aptitude. It requires, in particular, a supple and indifferent mind, ready to take its cue from other people, with the art of representing things from day to day not exactly as they are, but as an editor or paymaster wants them to appear. If we suffered our journalists to sign their articles, they would probably write better, with more self-respect and a higher sense of responsibility; they would become stronger in themselves, and would be more influential with their readers. As it is, few men with vigorous and original minds can endure beyond a year or two of political leader-writing.

Graham had tried it, and the ordeal was too difficult for him. Now he had a greater scope for his abilities, and less money for his pains.

Clara Graham was the daughter of a solicitor in Angleford, and had known Lettice Campion from childhood.

She was a pretty woman, thoroughly good-hearted, with tastes and powers somewhat in advance of her education. Perhaps she stood a little in awe of Lettice, and wondered occasionally whether her husband considered a woman who knew Latin and Greek, and wrote clever articles in *The Decade*, superior to one who had no such accomplishments, though she might be prettier, and the mother of his children, and even the darner of his stockings. But Clara was not without wits, so she did not propound questions of that sort to her husband; she reserved them for her own torment, and then expiated her jealousy by being kinder to Lettice than ever.

Lettice's plans were far more fixed and decided than Sydney knew. She had corresponded very fully and frankly with the Grahams on the subject, and Mr. Graham was already looking about for a place where she could set up her household gods. It was no use to consult Mrs. Campion on the subject. Her husband's death had thrown her into a state of mental torpor which seemed at first to border upon imbecility; and although she recovered to some extent from the shock, her health had been too much shaken to admit of complete recovery. Thenceforward she was an invalid and an old woman, who had abnegated her will in favor of her daughter's, and asked for nothing better than to be governed as well as cared for. The change was a painful one to Lettice, but practically it left her freer than ever, for her mother wanted little companionship, and was quite as happy with the maid that Lettice had brought from Angleford as with Lettice herself. The visit to the Grahams was an excellent thing both for Mrs. Campion and for her daughter. Clara managed to win the old lady's heart, and so relieved her friend of much of her anxiety. The relief came not a moment too soon, for the long strain to which Lettice had been subjected began to tell upon her and she was sorely in need of rest. The last three or four years had been a time of almost incessant worry to her. She had literally had the care of the household on her shoulders, and it had needed both courage and endurance of no ordinary kind to enable her to discharge her task without abandoning that inner and intellectual life which had become so indispensable to her well-being. The sudden death of her father was a paralyzing blow, but the care exacted from her by her mother had saved her from the physical collapse which it might have brought about. Now, when the necessity for immediate exertion had passed away, the reaction was very great, and it was fortunate that she had at this crisis the bracing companionship of James Graham, and Clara's friendly and stimulating acerbities.

Lettice had reached the age of five and twenty without experiencing either love, or intimate friendship, or intellectual sympathy. She had had neither of those two things which a woman, and especially an intellectual woman, constantly craves, and in the absence of which she cannot be happy. Either of the two may suffice for happiness, both together would satisfy her completely, but the woman who has not one or the other is a stranger to content. The nature of a woman requires either equality of friendship, a free exchange of confidence, trust and respect—having which, she can put up with a good deal of apparent coldness and dryness of heart in her friend ; or else she wants the contrasted savor of life, caressing words, demonstrations of tenderness, amenities and attentions, which keep her heart at rest even if they do not satisfy her whole nature. If she gets neither of these things the love or friendship never wakes, or, having been aroused, it dies of inanition.

So it was with Lettice. The one oasis in the wilderness of her existence had been the aftermath of love which sprang up between her and her father in the last few years, when she felt him depending upon her, confiding and trusting in her, and when she had a voice in the shaping of his life. But even this love, unsurpassable in its tenderness, was only as a faint shadow in a thirsty land. Such as it was, she had lost it, and the place which it had occupied was an aching void.

The one desire left to her at present was to become an absolutely independent woman. This meant that she should work hard for her living in her own way, and that she should do what seemed good and pleasant to her, because it seemed good and pleasant, not because it was the way of the world, or the way of a house, or the routine of a relative or an employer. It meant that she should keep her mother under her own eye, in comfort and decency, not lodged with strangers to mope out her life in dreary solitude. It meant also that she should not be a burden on Sydney—or, in plain terms, that she should not take Sydney's money, either for herself or her mother.

Indeed, the consciousness that she had to work for another, and to be her protection and support, was not only bracing but cheering in its effects, and Lettice now turned towards her writing-table with an energy which had been wanting when her efforts were for herself alone.

The Rectory household had been reduced as much as possible during the last few months, and only two servants remained at the time of the rector's death: one, an elderly cook, who was content for the love of "Miss Lettice" to do the work of a general servant; and a young girl of eighteen, who had lived at the Rectory and been trained for domestic service under Mrs. Campion's eye ever since her parents' death, which had occurred when she was fifteen years of age. Emily, or Milly Harrington, as she was generally called, was a quick, clever girl, very neat-handed and fairly industrious; and it seemed to Lettice, when she decided upon going to London, that she could not do better than ask Milly to go too. The girl's great blue eyes opened with a flash of positive rapture. "Go with you to London? Oh, Miss Lettice!"

"You would like it, Milly?" said Lettice, wondering at her excitement, and thinking that she had never before noticed how pretty Millie Harrington had grown of late.

"Oh, of all things in the world, miss, I've wanted to go to London!" said Milly, flushing all over her face through the clear white skin which was one of her especial beauties.

There was very little trace of commonness in Milly's good looks. Three years of life at the Rectory had refined her appearance, as also her manners and ways of speech; and Lettice thought that it would be far pleasanter to keep Milly about her than to go through the agonies of a succession of pert London girls. Yet something in Milly's eagerness to go, as well as the girl's fresh, innocent, country air, troubled her with a vague sense of anxiety. Was not London said to be a place of temptation for inexperienced country girls? Could she keep Milly safe and innocent if she took her away from Angleford?

"You would have all the work of the house to do, and to look after Mrs. Campion a little as well," she said seeking to put her vague anxiety into the form of a warning or an objection. But Milly only smiled.

"I'm very strong, Miss Lettice. I am sure I can do all that you want. And I should like to go to London with you. One hears such fine tales of London—and I don't want to leave mistress and you." Though this was evidently an afterthought.

"You will see very little of London, Milly; I shall live in a very quiet part," said Lettice. "And I shall want you to be very good and steady, and take care of my mother when I am busy. I shall have to work hard now, you know; quite as hard as you."

Milly looked up quickly; there was inquiry in her eyes. But she answered only by protestations of good behavior and repeated desires to go with her young mistress; and Lettice gave her a promise, subject to the consent of Milly's grandmother, who lived at Birchmead, that she would take the girl with her when she went away.

Old Mrs. Harrington had no objection at all to Milly's going to London. "Indeed, Miss Lettice," she said, "I'm only too glad to think of your looking after her, for Milly's not got much sense, I'm afraid, although she's a woman grown."

"I always thought her unusually clever and sensible," said Lettice, in some surprise.

"Clever, miss, she always was, but sensible's a different affair. Her head's filled with foolishness, all along of her reading story books, I tell her; and she's got an idea that her pretty face will bring her a rich husband, and I don't know what beside. I shall be obliged to you, miss, if you'll kindly keep a sharp eye and a tight hand over Milly. Not but what she's a good kind-hearted girl," said the old woman, relenting a little, as she saw a rather startled expression on Miss Campion's face, "and I don't think there's any harm in her, but girls are always better for being looked after, that is all."

"I'll try to take care of Milly," said Lettice, as she rose to go. "But my care will be of very little use if she does not take care of herself."

She was fated on the same day to hear a remonstrance from the doctor's wife, Mrs. Budworth, on the subject of her choice of a servant. Mrs. Budworth was a noted busybody, who knew everybody's business better than the rest of the world.

"Oh, Lettice, dear," she said, "I do hope it's not true that you are going to take that silly girl, Milly Harrington, up to London with you."

"Why not? You cannot know anything against her," said Lettice, who was becoming a little angry.

"Well, perhaps not—only she is so very pretty, and London is so full of temptations for a pretty girl of that class!"

"We shall live so quietly that she will have no more temptations there than here, Mrs. Budworth."

"You can't tell that, my dear—once you get a girl away from her friends and relations. However, she has only her old grandmother to fall back on, and she seems a well-meaning girl enough, and perhaps she won't be considered so pretty in London as she has the name of being here. I hope she will keep straight, I'm sure; it would be such a worry to you, Lettice, if anything went wrong."

"Poor Milly!" said Lettice to herself, as she walked home in a state of blazing indignation; "how easily that woman would undermine your reputation—or that of anybody else! Milly is a dear, good little girl; and as for her being so pretty—well, it is not her fault, and I don't see why it should be her misfortune! I will look well after her when we are in London, and it will be for her good, I believe, to stay with us. What an absurd fuss to make about such a trifle!"

So she dismissed the matter from her mind, remembering it only from time to time when she was making her new household arrangements, and carefully planning to keep Milly out of every possible danger.

But dangers are oftener from within than from without. While Lettice walked homeward after her talk with Mrs. Budworth, Milly Harrington had locked herself into her own room, and was experimenting with her pretty curling hair before the looking-glass. She wanted to see herself with a "fringe"—a thing that was strictly forbidden at the Rectory, and she had brushed the soft little curls that were generally hidden beneath her cap well over her forehead. Then she stood and gazed at the reflection of the fair locks, the large blue eyes, the graceful neck and shoulders. "I suppose I look pretty," she was saying to herself. "I've been told so often enough. Mr. Sydney thought so when he was here at Christmas, I'm sure of that. This time, of course, he was so taken up with his father's death, and other things, that he never noticed me. But I shall see him again."

A faint color mantled in her cheeks, and her eyes began to sparkle.

"Beauty's a great power, I've heard," she said to herself, still looking at that fair image in the glass. "There's no knowing what I mayn't do if I meet the right person. And one meets nobody in Angleford. In London—things may be different."

Different, indeed, but not as poor Milly fancied the difference.

And then she brushed back her curls, and fastened up her black dress, and tied a clean muslin apron round her trim little figure before going downstairs; and when she brought in the tea-tray that afternoon, Lettice looked at her with pleasure and admiration, and thought how sweet and good a girl she was, and how she had won the Prayer-Book prize at the Diocesan Inspector's examination, and of the praise that the rector had given her for her well-written papers at the Confirmation Class, and of her own kindly and earnest teaching of all things that were good in Lettice's eyes; and she decided that Mrs. Harrington and Mrs. Budworth were mere croakers, and that poor Milly would never come to harm.

BOOK II.

CHANGE.

"Yet the twin habit of that early time
Lingered for long about the heart and tongue;
We had been natives of one happy clime,
And its dear accent to our utterance clung.

"Till the dire years whose awful name is Change
Had grasped our souls, still yearning in divorce,
And pitiless shaped them in two forms that range—
Two elements which sever their life's course."

George Eliot.

CHAPTER VI.

NEW BEGINNINGS.

"Poor dear Lettice! how she must have suffered!" said Clara Graham.

"Less than you suppose," rejoined her husband.

"Jim, what do you mean? You are very hard-hearted."

"No, I'm not! I'm only practical. Your friend, Miss Campion, has been a source of lamentation and woe to you ever since I made your acquaintance. According to you, she was always being sacrificed to that intolerable prig of a brother of hers. *Then* she was immolated on the altar of her father's money difficulties and her mother's ill-health. Now she has got a fair field, and can live where she likes and exercise her talents as she pleases; and as I can be as unfeeling as I like in the bosom of my family, I will at once acknowledge that I am very glad the old man's gone."

"I do hope and trust, Jim——"

"That I am not a born fool, my dear?"

"—That you won't say these things to Lettice herself."

"Exactly. That is what I knew you were going to say."

"If it weren't that I am certain you do not mean half you say——"

"I mean all that I say: every word of it. But I'll tell you what, Clara: I believe that Lettice Campion is a woman of great talent—possibly even of genius—and that she has never yet been able to give her talents full play. She has the chance now, and I hope she'll use it."

"Oh, Jim, dear, do you think she is so sure to succeed?"

"If she doesn't, it will be pure cussedness on her part, and nothing else," said Jim.

Clara reflected that she would tell Lettice what her husband said. She moved to the window and looked out. She was waiting for her guests, Lettice and Mrs. Campion, in the soft dusk of a sweet May evening, and she was a little impatient for their arrival. She had had a comfortable, nondescript meal, which she called dinner-tea, set ready for them in the dining-room, and as this room was near the hall-door, she had installed herself therein, so that she could the more easily watch for her visitors. Mr. Graham, a tall, thin man, with coal-black beard, deep-set dark eyes, and marked features, had thrown himself into a great arm-chair, where he sat buried in the current number of a monthly magazine. His wife was universally declared to be a very pretty woman, and she was even more "stylish," as women say, than pretty; for she had one of those light, graceful figures that give an air of beauty to everything they wear. For the rest, she had well-cut features, bright dark eyes, and a very winning smile. A brightly impulsive and affectionate nature had especially endeared her to Lettice, and this had never been soured or darkened by her experiences of the outer world, although, like most people, she had known reverses of fortune and was not altogether free from care. But her husband loved her, and her three babies were the most charming children ever seen, and everybody admired the decorations of her bright little house in Edwardes Square; and what more could the heart of womankind desire?

"I wonder," she said presently, "whether Sydney will come with them. He was to meet them at Liverpool Street; and of course I asked him to come on."

"I would have gone out if you had told me that before," said Mr. Graham, tersely.

"Why do you dislike Sydney Campion so much, Jim?"

"Dislike? I admire him. I think he is the coming man. He's one of the most successful persons of my acquaintance. It is just because I feel so small beside him that I can't stand his company."

"I must repeat, Jim, that if you talk like that to Lettice——"

"Oh, Lettice doesn't adore her precious brother," said Graham, irreverently. "She knows as well as you and I do that he's a selfish sort of brute, in spite of his good looks and his gift of the gab. I say, Clara, when are these folks coming? I'm confoundedly hungry."

"Who's the selfish brute now?" asked Clara, with triumph. "But you won't be kept waiting long: the cab's stopping at the door, and Sydney hasn't come."

She flew to the door, to be the first to meet and greet her visitors. There was not much to be got from Mrs. Campion that evening except tears—this was evident as soon as she entered the house, leaning on Lettice's arm; and the best thing was to put her at once to bed, and delay the evening meal until Lettice was able to leave her. Graham was quite too good-natured to grumble at a delay for which there was so valid a reason; for, as he informed his wife, he preferred Miss Campion's conversation without an accompaniment of groans. He talked lightly, but his grasp of the hand was so warm, his manner so sympathetic, when Lettice at last came down, that Clara felt herself rebuked at having for one moment doubted the real kindliness of his feeling.

Lettice in her deep mourning looked painfully white and slender in Clara's eyes; but she spoke cheerfully of her prospects for the future, as they sat at their evening meal. Sad topics were not broached, and Mr. Graham set himself to give her all the encouragement in his power.

"And as to where you are to set up your tent," he said, "Clara and I have seen a cottage on Brook Green that we think would suit you admirably."

"Where is Brook Green?" asked Lettice, who was almost ignorant of any save the main thoroughfares of London.

"In the wilds of Hammersmith——"

"West Kensington," put in Clara, rather indignantly.

"Well, West Kensington is only Hammersmith writ fine. It is about ten minutes' walk from us——"

"Oh, I am glad of that," said Lettice.

"—And it is not, I think, too large or too dear. You must go and look at it to-morrow, if you can."

"Is there any garden?"

"There is a garden, with trees under which your mother can sit when it it warm. Clara told me you would like that; and there is a grass-plot—I won't call it a lawn—where you can let your dog and cat disport themselves in safety. I am sure you must have brought a dog or a cat with you, Miss Campion. I never yet knew a young woman from the country who did not bring a pet animal to town with her."

"Jim, you are very rude," said his wife.

"I shall have to plead guilty," Lettice answered, smiling a little. "I have left my fair Persian, Fluff, in the care of my maid, Milly, who is to bring her to London as soon as I can get into my new home."

"Fluff," said Clara, meditatively, "is the creature with a tail as big as your arm, and a ruff round her neck, and Milly is the pretty little housemaid; I remember and approve of them both."

The subject of the new house served them until they went upstairs into Clara's bright little drawing-room, which Graham used to speak of disrespectfully as his wife's doll's house. It was crowded with pretty but inexpensive knick-knacks, the profusion of which was rather bewildering to Lettice, with her more simple tastes. Of one thing she was quite sure, that she would not, when she furnished her own rooms, expend much money in droves of delicately-colored china pigs and elephants, which happened to be in fashion at the time. She also doubted the expediency of tying up two peacocks' feathers with a yellow ribbon, and hanging them in solitary glory on the wall flanked by plates of Kaga ware, at tenpence-halfpenny a-piece. Lettice's taste had been formed by her father, and was somewhat masculine in its simplicity, and she cared only for the finer kinds of art, whether in porcelain or painting. But she was fain to confess that the effect of Clara's decorations was very pretty, and she wondered at the care and pains which had evidently been spent on the arrangement of Mrs. Graham's "Liberty rags" and Oriental ware. When the soft yellow silk curtains were drawn, and a subdued light fell through the jewelled facets of an Eastern lamp upon the peacock fans and richly-toned Syrian rugs, and all the other hackneyed ornamentation by which "artistic" taste is supposed to be shown, Lettice could not but acknowledge that the room was charming. But her thoughts flew back instantly to the old study at home, with its solid oak furniture, its cushioned window-seats, its unfashionable curtains of red moreen; and in the faint sickness of that memory, it seemed to her that she could be more comfortable at a deal table, with a kitchen chair set upon unpolished boards, than in the midst of Clara's pretty novelties.

"You are tired," Mr. Graham said to her, watching her keenly as she sat down in the chair that he offered her, and let her hands sink languidly upon her lap. "We won't let you talk too much. Clara is going to see after her bairns, and I'm going to read the *Pall Mall.* Here's the May number of *The Decade:* have you seen it?"

She took it with a grateful smile; but she did not intend to read, and Mr. Graham knew it. He perused his paper diligently, but he was sufficiently interested in her to know exactly at what point she ceased to brood and began to glance at the magazine. After a little while, she became absorbed in its pages; and only when she laid it down at last, with a half suppressed sigh, did he openly look up to find that her eyes were full of tears.

"I hope that you discovered something to interest you," he said.

"I was reading a poem," Lettice answered, rather guiltily.

"Oh—Alan Walcott's 'Sorrow'? Very well done, isn't it? but a trifle morbid, all the same."

"It is very sad. Is he—has he had much trouble?"

"I'm sure I couldn't tell you. Probably not, as he writes about it," said Graham, grimly. "He's a pessimist and a bit of a dilletante. If he would work and believe in himself a little more, I think he might do great things."

"He is young?"

"Over thirty. He comes to the house sometimes. I daresay you will meet him before long."

Lettice said nothing. She was not in a mood to enjoy the prospect of making new acquaintances; but the poem had touched her, and she felt a slight thrill of interest in its writer.

"Yes," she said, "I shall be pleased to make his acquaintance—some day." And then the conversation dropped, and Graham understood from her tone that she was not disposed as yet to meet new faces.

The house on Brook Green proved eminently satisfactory. She agreed to take it as soon as possible, and for the next few weeks her mind was occupied with the purchase and arrangement of furniture, and the many details which belong to the first start in a new career. Although her tastes differed widely from those of Clara Graham, she found her friend's advice and assistance infinitely valuable to her; and many were the expeditions taken together to the Kensington shops to supply Lettice's requirements. She had not Clara's love for shopping, or Clara's eagerness for a bargain; but she took pleasure in her visits to the great London store-houses of beautiful things, and made her purchases with care and deliberation.

So at the end of June she settled down with her mother in the pleasant cottage which was thenceforth to be their home. In addition to the new plenishing, there were in the house a few favorite pieces of furniture which had been saved from the wreck at Angleford ; and Sydney—perhaps as a sign that he recognized some redeeming features in her desire to be independent—had made one room look quite imposing with an old-fashioned bookcase, and a library table and chair. There was a well-established garden behind the house, with tall box and bay-trees of more than a generation's growth, and plenty of those old English border plants without which a garden is scarcely worthy of its name. On the whole, Lettice felt that she had not made a bad selection out of the million or so of human habitations which overflow the province of London ; and even Mrs. Campion would occasionally end her lamentations over the past by admitting that Maple Cottage was "not a workhouse, my dear, where I might have expected to finish my life."

The widow had a fixed idea about the troubles which had fallen upon her. She would talk now and then of the "shameful robberies" which had broken her husband's heart, and declare that sooner or later the miscreants would be discovered, and restitution would be made, and they would "all end their days in peace." As for Sydney, he was still her hero of heroes, who had come to their rescue when their natural protector was done to death, and whose elevation to the woolsack might be expected at any moment.

Lettice's friends, the Grahams, had naturally left her almost undisturbed during her visit to them, so far as invited guests were concerned. Nevertheless, she casually met several of Mr. Graham's literary acquaintances, and he took care to introduce her to one or two editors and publishers whom he thought likely to be useful to her. James Graham had plenty of tact ; he knew just what to say about Miss Campion, without saying too much, and he contrived to leave an impression in the minds of those to whom he spoke that it might be rather difficult to make this young woman sit down and write, but decidedly worth their while to do it if they could.

"Now I have thrown in the seeds," Graham said to her before she left Edwardes Square, "and by the time you want to see them the blades will be springing up. From what you have told me I should say that you have quite enough to do in the next three months. There is that article for me, and the translation of Feuerbach, and the Ouf stories."

This reminiscence of Sydney's criticism made Lettice laugh—she was beginning to laugh again—and Graham's forecast of her future as a woman of letters put her into a cheerful and hopeful mood.

The summer passed away, and the autumn, and when Lettice lighted her first study fire, one cold day at the end of October, she could look forward to the coming winter without misgiving, In four months she had done fifty pounds' worth of work, and she had commissions which would keep her busy for six months more, and would yield at least twice as much money. Mr. Graham's seeds were beginning to send up their blades; and, in short, Lettice was in a very fair way of earning not only a living, but also a good literary repute.

One call, indeed, was made upon her resources in a very unexpected manner. She had put by four five-pound notes of clear saving—it is at such moments that our unexpected liabilities are wont to find us out—and she was just congratulating herself on that first achievement in the art of domestic thrift when her maid Milly knocked at her door, and announced a visitor.

"Please, miss, here is Mrs. Bundlecombe of Thorley!"

Mrs. Bundlecombe was a bookseller in her own right, in a village some three miles from Angleford. Her husband had died four years before Mr. Campion, and his widow made an effort to carry on the business. The rector in his palmy days had had many dealings with Mr. Bundlecombe, who was of some note in the world as a collector of second-hand books; but, as Lettice had no reason to think that he had bought anything of Mrs. Bundlecombe personally, she could not imagine what the object of this visit might be.

"Did she say what her business was, Milly?"

"No, miss. Only she said she had heard you were living here, and she would like to see you, please."

Milly's relations had lived in Thorley. Thus she knew Mrs. Bundlecombe by sight, and, being somewhat inquisitive by nature, she had already tried to draw the visitor into conversation, but without success.

"Show her in," said Lettice, after a moment's pause. It was pleasant, after all, to meet a "kent face" in London solitudes, and she felt quite kindly towards Mrs. Bundlecombe, whom she had sometimes seen over the counter in her shop at Thorley. So she received her with gentle cordiality.

Mrs. Bundlecombe showed symptoms of embarrassment at the quiet friendliness of Lettice's manners. She was not a person of aristocratic appearance, for she was short and very stout, and florid into the bargain; but her broad face was both shrewd and kindly, and her grey eyes were observant and good-humored. Her grey hair was arranged in three flat curls, fastened with small black combs on each side of her face, which was rosy and wrinkled like a russet apple, and her full purple skirt, her big bonnet, adorned with bows of scarlet ribbon, and her much be-furbelowed and be-spangled dolman, attested the fact that she had donned her best clothes for the occasion of her visit, and that Thorley fashions differed from those of the metropolis. She wore gloves with one button, moreover, and boots with elastic sides.

Mrs. Bundlecombe seemed to have some difficulty in coming to the point. She told Lettice much Angleford news, including a piece of information that interested her a good deal: namely, that the old squire, after many years of suffering, was dead, and that his nephew, Mr. Brooke Dalton, had at last succeeded to the property. "He's not there very much, however: he leaves the house pretty much to his sister, Miss Edith Dalton; but it's to be hoped that he'll marry soon and bring a lady to the place."

Lettice wondered again why Mrs. Bundlecombe had called upon her. There seemed very little point in her remarks. But the good woman had a very sufficient reason for her call. She was a practical-minded person, and she was moreover a literary woman in her way, as behoved the widow of a bookseller who had herself taken to selling books. It is true that her acquaintance with the works of British authors did not extend far beyond their titles, but it was to her credit that she contrived to make so much as she did out of her materials. She might have known as many insides of books as she knew outsides, and have put them to less practical service.

"Well, she said, after a quarter of an hour's incessant talk, "you will be wondering what brought me here, and to be sure, miss, I hardly like to say it now I've come; but, as I argued with myself, the rights of man are the rights of man, and to do your best by them who depend on you is the whole duty of man, which applies, I take it, to woman also. And when my poor dear husband died, I thought the path of duty was marked out for me, and I went through my daily exercises, so to speak, just as he had done for forty years. But times were bad, and I could make nothing of it. He had ways of selling books that I could never understand, and I soon saw that the decline and fall was setting in. So I have sold the business for what it would fetch, and paid all that was owing, and I can assure you that there is very little left. I have a nephew in London who is something in the writing way himself. He used to live with us at Thorley, and he is a dear dutiful boy, but he has had great troubles; so I am going to keep his rooms for him, and take care of his linen, and look after things a bit. I came up to-day to talk to him about it.

"Well, Miss Campion, the long and short of it is that as I was looking over my husband's state documents, so to speak, which he had kept in a private drawer, and which I had never found until I was packing up to go, I found a paper signed by your respected father, less than three months before my good man went to his saint's everlasting rest. You see, miss, it is an undertaking to pay Samuel Bundlecombe the sum of twenty pounds in six months from date, for value received, but owing to my husband dying that sudden, and not telling me of his private drawer, this paper was never presented."

Lettice took the paper and read it, feeling rather sick at heart, for two or three reasons. If her father had made this promise she felt sure that he would either have kept it or have put down the twenty pounds in his list of debts. The list, indeed, which had been handed to Sydney was in her own writing, and certainly the name of Bundlecombe was not included in it. Was the omission her fault? If the money had never been paid, that was what she would prefer to believe.

"I thought, miss," her visitor continued, "that there might be some mention of this in Mr. Campion's papers, and, having heard that all the accounts were properly settled, I made bold to bring it to your notice. It is a kind of social contract, you see, and a solemn league and covenant, as between man and man, which I am sure you would like to settle if the means exist. Not but what it seems a shame to come to a lady on such an errand; and I may tell you miss, fair and candid, that I have been to Mr. Sydney Campion in the Temple, who does not admit that he is liable. That may be law, or it may not, but I do consider that this signature ought to be worth the money."

Lettice took the paper again. There could be no doubt as to its genuineness, and the fact that Sydney had denied his liability influenced her in some subtle manner to do what she had already half resolved to do without that additional argument.

She looked at the box in which she had put her twenty pounds, and she looked at her father's signature. Then she opened the box and took out the notes.

"You did quite right in coming, Mrs. Bundlecombe. This is certainly my father's handwriting, and I suppose that if the debt had been settled the paper would not have remained in your husband's possession. Here is the money."

The old woman could scarcely believe her eyes; but she pocketed the notes with great satisfaction, and began to express her admiration for such honorable conduct in a very voluble manner. Lettice cut her short and got rid of her, and then, if the truth must be confessed, she sat down and had a comfortable cry over the speedy dissipation of her savings.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. HARTLEY AT HOME.

AFTER her first Christmas in London, Lettice began to accept invitations to the houses of her acquaintance.

She dined several times at the Grahams', where there were never more than eight at table, and, being a bright talker and an appreciative listener—two qualities which do not often go together—she was always an impressive personality without exactly knowing it. Clara was accustomed to be outshone by her in conversation, and had become used to it, but some of the women whom Lettice was invited to meet looked at her rather hard, as though they would have liked to draw her serious attention to the fact that they were better looking, or better dressed, or older or younger than herself, as the case might be, and that it was consequently a little improper in her to be talked to so much by the men.

Undoubtedly Lettice got on well with men, and was more at her ease with them than with her own sex. It was not the effect of forwardness on her part, and indeed she was scarcely conscious of the fact. She conversed readily, because her mind was full of reading and of thought, and her moral courage was never at a loss. The keenness of her perception led her to understand and respond to the opinions of the cleverest men whom she met, and it was not unnatural that they should be flattered.

It does not take long for a man or woman to earn a reputation in the literary circles of London, provided he or she has real ability, and is well introduced. The ability will not, as a rule, suffice without the introductions, though introductions have been known to create a reputation, lasting at any rate for a few months, without any real ability. Lettice advanced rapidly in the estimation of those whose good opinion was worth having. She soon began to discriminate between the people who were worth cultivating and the people who were not. If a person were sincere and straightforward, could say what he meant and say it with point and vivacity, or if he possessed for her those vaguely attractive and stimulating qualities which draw people together without their exactly knowing why (probably through some correlation of temperament), Lettice would feel this person was good to know, whether the world approved her choice of friends or not. And when she wanted to know man or woman, she exerted herself to please—mainly by showing that she herself was pleased. She did not exactly flatter—she was never insincere—but it amounted to much the same thing as flattery. She listened eagerly; her interest was manifested in her face, her attitude, her answers. In fact she was her absolute self, without reserve and without fence. No wonder that she incurred the jealousy of half the women in her set.

But this is how an intellectual woman can best please a man who has passed the childish age, when he only cared for human dolls and dolls' houses. She must carry her intellect about with her, like a brave costume—dressing, of course, with taste and harmony—she must not be slow to admire the intellectual costume of others, if she wants her own to be admired; she must be subtle enough at the same time to forget that she is dressed at all, and yet never for a moment forget that her companion may have no soul or heart except in his dress. If he has, it is for him to prove it, not for her to assume it.

It was because Lettice had this art of intellectual intercourse, and because she exercised it in a perfectly natural and artless manner, that she charmed so many of those who made her acquaintance, and that they rarely paused to consider whether she was prettier or plainer, taller or shorter, more or less prepossessing, than the women who surrounded her.

In due time she found herself welcomed at the houses of those dear and estimable ladies, who—generally old and childless themselves—love to gather round them the young and clever acolytes of literature and art, the enthusiastic devotees of science, the generous apprentices of constructive politics, for politicians who do not dabble in the reformation of society find other and more congenial haunts. This many-minded crowd of acolytes, and devotees, and apprentices, owe much to the hospitable women who bring them together in a sort of indulgent dame's school, where their angles are rubbed down, and whence they merge, perhaps, as Arthur Hallam said, the picturesque of man and man, but certainly also more fitted for their work in the social mill than if they had never known that kindly feminine influence.

Lettice became especially fond of one of these minor queens of literary society, who received her friends on Sunday afternoon, and whose drawing-room was frequently attended by a dozen or a score of well-reputed men and women. Mrs. Hartley was an excellent hostess. She was not only careful, to begin with, about her own acquaintance, cultivating none but those whom she had heard well spoken of by competent judges, but she knew how to make a second choice amongst the chosen, bringing kindred spirits together with a happy, instinctive sense of their mutual suitabilities. In spite of her many amiable and agreeable qualities, however, it took Lettice a little time to believe that she should ever make a friend of Mrs. Hartley, whose habit of assorting and labelling her acquaintances in groups struck her at first as artificial and conventional. Lettice objected, for her own part, to be classified.

She had been entreated so often by Clara to go to one of Mrs. Hartley's afternoons that it was with some compunction of heart that she prepared at last to fulfil her long-delayed promise. She walked from Brook Green to Edwardes Square, about three o'clock one bright Sunday afternoon, in February, and found Clara waiting for her. Clara was looking very trim and smart in a new gown of inexpensive material, but the latest, and she surveyed Lettice in a comprehensive manner from top to toe, as if to ascertain whether a proper value had been attached to Mrs. Hartley's invitation.

"You look very nice," was her verdict. "I am so glad that you have relieved your black at last, Lettice. There is no reason why you should not wear a little white or lavender."

And indeed this mitigation of her mourning weeds was becoming to Lettice, whose delicate bloom showed fresh and fair against the black and white of her new costume. She had pinned a little bunch of sweet violets into her jacket, and they harmonized excellently well with the grave tranquillity of her face and the soberness of her dress.

"I don't know why it is, but you remind me of a nun," Clara said, glancing at her in some perplexity. "The effect is quite charming, but it is nun-like too——"

"I am sure I don't know why; I never felt more worldly in my life," said Lettice, laughing. "Am I not fit for Mrs. Hartley's drawing-room?"

"Fit? You are lovely; but not quite like anybody else. That is the best of it; Mrs. Hartley will rave of you," said Clara, as they set forth. And the words jarred a little on Lettice's sensitive mind; she thought that she should object to be raved about.

They took an omnibus to Kensington High Street, and then they made their way to Campden Hill, where Mrs. Hartley's house was situated. And as they went, Clara took the opportunity of explaining Mrs. Hartley's position and claims to distinction. Mrs. Hartley was a widow, childless, rich, perfectly independent: she was very critical and very clever (said Mrs. Graham), but, oh, *so* kind-hearted! And she was sure that Lettice would like her.

Lettice meekly hoped that she should, although she had a guilty sense of wayward dislike to the woman in whose house, it appeared, she was to be exhibited. For some words of Graham's lingered in her mind. "Mrs. Hartley? The lion-hunter? Oh! so *you* are to be on view this afternoon, I understand." Accordingly, it was with no very pleasant anticipation that Lettice entered the lion-hunter's house on Campden Hill.

A stout, little grey-haired lady in black, with a very observant eye, came forward to greet the visitors. "This is Miss Campion, I feel sure," she said, putting out a podgy hand, laden with diamond rings. "Dear Mrs. Graham, how kind of you to bring her. Come and sit by me, Miss Campion, and tell me all about yourself. I want to know how you first came to think of literature as a profession?"

This was not the way in which people talked at Angleford. Lettice felt posed for a moment, and then a sense of humor came happily to her relief.

"I drifted into it, I am afraid," she answered, composedly.

"Drifted? No, I am sure you would never drift. You don't know how interested I am, Miss Campion, in the development of the human mind, or you would not try to evade the question. Now, which interests you most, poetry or prose?"

"That depends upon my mood; I am not sure that I am permanently interested in either," Lettice said, quietly.

Her hostess' observant eye was upon her for a moment; then Mrs. Hartley's face expanded in a benignant smile.

"Ah, I see you are very clever," she said. "I ask the question—not from idle curiosity, because I have representatives of both in the room at the present moment. There is a poet, whom I mean to introduce you to by and by, if you will allow me; and there is the very embodiment of prose close beside you, although I don't believe that he writes any, and, like M. Jourdain, talks it without knowing that it is prose."

Lettice glanced involuntarily at the man beside her, and glanced again. Where had she seen his face before? He was a rather stout, blonde man, with an honest open countenance that she liked, although it expressed good nature rather than intellectual force.

"Don't you remember him?" said Mrs. Hartley, in her ear. "He's a cousin of mine: Brooke Dalton, whose uncle used to live at Angleford. He has been wanting to meet you very much; he remembers you quite well, he tells me."

The color rose in Lettice's face. She was feminine enough to feel that a connecting link between Mrs. Hartley and her dear old home changed her views of her hostess at once. She looked up and smiled. "I remember Mr. Dalton too," she said.

"What a sweet face!" Mrs. Hartley said to herself. "Now if Brooke would only take it into his head to settle down——"

And aloud she added: "Brooke, come and be introduced to Miss Campion. You used to know her at Angleford."

"It seems a long time since I saw you," Mr. Dalton said, rather clumsily, as he took Lettice's hand into a very cordial clasp. "It was that day in December when your brother had just got his scholarship at Trinity."

"Oh, yes; that day! I remember it very well," said Lettice, drawing a long breath, which was not exactly a sigh, although it sounded like one. "I gave up being a child on that day, I believe!"

"There have been many changes since then." Brooke Dalton was not brilliant in conversation.

"You have heard of them all, I suppose? Yes, my mother and I are in London now."

"You will allow me to call, I hope?"

Lettice had but time to signify her consent, when Mrs. Hartley seized on her again, but this time Lettice did not so much object to be cross-examined. She recognized the fact that Mrs. Hartley's aim was kindly, and she submitted to be asked questions about her work and her prospects, and to answer them with a frankness that amazed herself.

But in the very midst of the conversation she was conscious of being much observed by two or three people in the room; notably by Brooke Dalton, who had planted himself in a position from which he could look at her without attracting the other visitors' remark; and also by a tall man with a dark, melancholy face, deep-set eyes, and a peaked Vandyke beard, whose glances were more furtive than those of Dalton, but equally interested and intent. He was a handsome man, and Lettice found herself wondering whether he were not "somebody," and somebody worth talking to, moreover; for he was receiving, in a languid, half-indifferent manner, a great deal of homage from the women in the room. He seemed bored by it, and was turning away in relief from a lady who had just quoted half-a-dozen lines of Shelley for his especial behoof, when Mrs. Hartley, who had been discussing Feuerbach and the German materialists with Lettice, caught his eye, and beckoned him to her side.

"Mr. Walcott," she said, "I never heard that you were a materialist, and I don't think it is very likely; so you can condole with Miss Campion on having been condemned to translate five hundred pages of Feuerbach. Now, isn't that terrible?"

"I don't know Feuerbach," said the poet, after he had bowed to Lettice, "but it sounds warm and comfortable on a wintry day. Nevertheless, I do condole with her."

"I am not sure that I need condolence," said Lettice. "The work was really very interesting, and one likes to know what any philosopher has to say for himself, whether one believes in his theories or not. I must say I have enjoyed reading Feuerbach,—though he *is* a German with a translatable name."

This was a flippant speech, as Lettice acknowledged to herself; but, then, Mr. Walcott's speech had been flippant to begin with, and she wanted to give as good as she got.

"You read German, then?" said Walcott, sitting down in the chair that Mrs. Hartley had vacated, and looking at Lettice with interest, although he did not abandon the slight affectation of tone and manner that she had noted from the beginning of her talk with him. "How nice that must be! I often wish I knew something more than my schoolboy's smattering of Greek, Latin, and French."

Lettice had read Mr. Walcott's last volume of poems, which were just then exciting considerable interest in the literary world, and she could not help recalling one or two lyrics and sonnets from Uhland, Filicaja, and other Continentals. As though divining her thoughts, Walcott went on quickly, with much more sincerity of tone:

"I do try now and then to put an idea that strikes me from German or Italian into English; but think of my painful groping with a dictionary, before the cramped and crippled idea can reach my mind! I am the translator most in need of condolence, Miss Campion!"

"Yet, even without going to other languages," said Lettice, "there is an unlimited field in our own, both for ideas and for expression—as well as a practically unlimited audience."

"The artists and musicians say that their domains are absolutely unlimited—that the poet sings to those who happen to speak his language, whilst they discourse to the whole world and to all time. I suppose, in a sense, they are right."

He spoke listlessly, as if he did not care whether they were right or wrong.

But Lettice's eyes began to glow.

"Surely in a narrow sense! They would hardly say that Handel or Beethoven speaks to a wider audience than Homer or Shakspeare, and certainly no musician or painter or sculptor can hope to delight mankind for as many centuries as a poet. And, then, to think what an idea can accomplish—what Greek ideas have done in England, for instance, or Roman ideas in France, or French ideas in nearly every country of Europe! Could a tune make a revolution, or a picture destroy a religion?"

"Perhaps, yes," said Walcott, wishing to draw her out, "if the tunes or the pictures could be repeated often enough, and brought before the eyes and ears of the multitude."

"I do not think so. And, at any rate, that could not be done by way of systematic and comprehensive teaching, so that your comparison only suggests another superiority in literary expression. A poet can teach a whole art, or establish a definite creed; he can move the heart and mould the mind at the same time; but one can hardly imagine such an effect from the work of those who speak to us only through the eye or ear."

By this time Alan Walcott was fairly interested. What Lettice said might be commonplace enough, but it did not strike him so. It was her manner that pleased him, her quiet fervor and gentle insistance, which showed that she was accustomed to think for herself, and suggested that she would have the honesty to say what she thought. And, of course, he applied to himself all that she said about poets in general, and was delighted by her warm championship of his special vocation. As they went on talking for another quarter of an hour he recognized, without framing the admission in words, that Miss Campion was an exceedingly well-read person, and that she knew many authors—even poets—with whom he had the slightest acquaintance. Most of the people whom he met talked idle nonsense to him, as though their main object was to pass the time, or else they aired a superficial knowledge of the uppermost thoughts and theories of the day, gleaned as a rule from the cheap primers and magazine articles in which a bustled age is content to study its science, art, economy, politics, and religion. But here was a woman who had been a voracious reader, who had gone to the fountain-head for her facts, and who yet spoke with the air of one who wanted to learn, rather than to display.

"We have had a very pleasant talk," he said to her at last. "I mean that I have found it very pleasant. I am going now to dine at my club, and shall spend my evening over a monologue which has suggested itself since I entered this room. As you know the Grahams I may hope to meet you again, there if not here. A talk with you, Miss Campion, is what the critics in the *Acropolis* might call very suggestive!"

Again Lettice thought the manner and the speech affected, but there was an air of sincerity about the man which seemed to be fighting down the affectation. She hardly knew whether she liked him or not, but she knew that he had interested her and made her talk—for which two things she half forgave him the affectation.

"I knew you two would get on together," said Mrs. Hartley, who came up at the moment and dropped into Alan Walcott's chair. "I am not easily deceived in my friends, and I was sure you would have plenty to say to each other. I have been watching you, and I declare it was quite a case of conversation at first sight. Now, mind you come to me often, Miss Campion. I feel that I shall like you."

And the fat good-natured little woman nodded her grey head to emphasize the compliment.

"It is kind of you to say that," said Lettice, warmly. "I will certainly take you at your word."

"My dear," said Mrs. Hartley, when Alan Walcott had left them, "he is a very nice and clever man—but, oh, so melancholy! He makes me feel quite unhappy. I never saw him so animated as he was just now, and it must be thoroughly good for him to be drawn out in that way."

"I suppose it is the natural mood of poets," Lettice answered with a smile. "It is an old joke against them."

"Ah, but I think the race is changing its characteristics in these days, and going in for cheerfulness and comfort. There is Mr. Pemberton, for instance—how aggravatingly prosperous he looks! Do you see how he beams with good nature on all the world? I should say that he is a jovial man—and yet, you know, he has been down there, as they said of Dante."

"Perhaps it goes by opposites. What I have read of Mr. Walcott's poetry is rather light than sad—except one or two pieces in *The Decade*."

"Poor man! I think there is another cause for his melancholy. He lost his wife two or three years ago, and I have been told that she was a charming creature, and that her death upset him terribly. He has only just begun to go about again."

"How very unfortunate!" said Lettice. "And that makes it still more strange that his poems should be so slightly tinged with melancholy. He must live quite a double life. Most men would give expression to their personal griefs, and publish them for everybody to read; but he keeps them sacred. That is much more interesting."

"I should think it is more difficult. It seems natural that a poet, being in grief, should write the poetry of grief."

"Yes—no doubt it is more difficult."

And Lettice, on her way home and afterwards, found herself pondering on the problem of a man who, recently robbed of a well-beloved wife, wrote a thousand verses without a single reference to her.

She took down his "Measures and Monologues," and read it through, to see what he had to say about women. There were a few cynical verses from Heine, and three bitter stanzas on the text from Balzac:—"Vous nous promettiez le bonheur, et finissiez par nous jeter dans une précipice;" but not one tender word applied to a woman throughout the book. It was certainly strange; and Lettice felt that her curiosity was natural and legitimate.

Alan Walcott, in fact, became quite an interesting study. During the next few months Lettice had many opportunities of arriving at a better knowledge of his character, and she amused herself by quietly pushing her inquiries into what was for her a comparatively new field of speculation. The outcome of the research was not very profitable. The more she saw of him the more he puzzled her. Qualities which appeared one day seemed to be entirely wanting when they next met. In some subtle manner she was aware that even his feelings and inclinations constantly varied; at one time he did not conceal his craving for sympathy, at another he was frigid and almost repellent. Lettice still did not know whether she liked or disliked him. But she was now piqued as well as interested, and so it happened that Mr. Walcott began to occupy more of her thoughts than she was altogether willing to devote to him.

So far, all their meetings were in public. They had never exchanged a word that the world might not hear. They saw each other at the Grahams' dinner-parties, at Mrs. Hartley's Sunday afternoon "at homes," and at one or two other houses. To meet a dozen times in a London season constitutes intimacy. Although they talked chiefly of books, sometimes of men and women, and never of themselves, Lettice began to feel that a confidential tone was creeping into their intercourse—that she criticized his poems with extraordinary freedom, and argued her opinions with him in a way that would certainly have staggered her brother Sydney if he had heard her. But in all this friendly talk, the personal note had never once been struck. He told her nothing of his inner self, of his past life, or his dreams for the future. All that they said might have been said to each other on their first meeting in Mrs. Hartley's drawing-room. It seemed as if some vague impalpable barrier had been erected between them, and Lettice puzzled herself from time to time to know how this barrier had been set up.

Sometimes—she did not know why—she was disposed to associate it with the presence of Brooke Dalton. That gentleman continued to display his usual lack of brilliance in conversation, together with much good-heartedness, soundness of judgment, and thoughtfulness for others; and in spite of his slowness of speech Lettice liked him very much. But why would he persist in establishing himself within earshot when Alan was talking to her? If they absolutely eluded him, he betrayed uneasiness, like that of a faithful dog who sees his beloved mistress in some danger. He did not often interrupt the conversation. He sat silent for the most part, unconsciously throwing a wet blanket over both speakers, and sometimes sending Walcott away in a state of almost irrepressible irritation. And yet he seemed to be on good terms with Alan. They spoke to each other as men who had been acquaintances, if not friends, for a good number of years; and he never made an allusion to Alan, in his absence, which could in the least be deemed disparaging. And yet Lettice felt that she was watched, and that there was some mysterious anxiety in Dalton's mind.

Having no companions (for Clara was too busy with her house and her children to be considered a companion for the day-time), Lettice sometimes went for solitary expeditions to various "sights" of London, and, as usual in such expeditions, had never once met anybody she knew. She had gone rather early one summer morning to Westminster Abbey, and was walking slowly through the dim cloistered shades, enjoying the coolness and the quietness, when she came full upon Alan Walcott, who seemed to be doing likewise.

They both started: indeed, they both changed color. For the first time they met outside a drawing-room; and the change in their environment seemed to warrant some change in their relation to one another. After the first greeting, and a short significant pause—for what can be more significant than silence between two people who have reached that stage of sensitiveness to each other's moods when every word or movement seems like self-revelation?—Alan spoke.

"You love this place—as I do; I know you love it."

"I have never been here before," said Lettice, letting her eyes stray dreamily over the grey stones at her feet.

"No, or I should have seen you. I am often here. And I see you so seldom——"

"So seldom?" said Lettice in some natural surprise. "Why, I thought we met rather often?"

"Under the world's eye," said Alan, but in so low a voice that she was not sure whether he meant her to hear or not. However, they both smiled; and he went on rather hurriedly, "It is the place of all others where I should expect to meet you. We think so much alike——"

"Do we?" said Lettice doubtfully. "But we differ very much."

"Not in essentials. Don't say that you think so," he said, in a tone that was almost passionately earnest. "I can't tell you how much it is to me to feel that I have a friend who understands—who sympathizes—who *would* sympathize, I am sure, if she knew all——"

He broke off suddenly, and the emotion in his voice so far touched Lettice that she remained silent, with drooping head and lowered eyes.

"Yes," he went on, "you owe me your sympathy now. You have given me so much that you must give me more. I have a right to it."

"Mr. Walcott!" said Lettice, raising her head quickly, "you can have no *right*——"

"No right to sympathy from a friend? Well, perhaps not," he answered bitterly. "I thought that, although you were a woman, you could allow me the claim I make. It is small enough, God knows! Miss Campion, forgive me for speaking so roughly. I ask most earnestly for your friendship and your sympathy; will you not give me these?"

Lettice moved onward towards the door. "Do you think that we ought to discuss our personal concerns in such a place as this?" she asked, evading the question in a thoroughly feminine manner.

"Why not? But if not here, then in another place. By the bye"—with a sudden change of manner, as they stepped into the light of day—"I have a rare book that I want to show you. Will you let me bring it to your house to-morrow morning? I think that you will be interested. May I bring it?"

"Yes," said Lettice mechanically. The change from fierce earnestness to this subdued conventionality of tone bewildered her a little.

"I will come at twelve, if that hour will suit you?"

"It will suit me very well."

And then he raised his hat and left her. Lettice, her pulses throbbing strangely, took her way back to Hammersmith. As she grew calmer, she wondered what had agitated her so much; it must have been something in his look or in his tone, for every effort to assure herself by a repetition of his words that they were mere commonplaces of conversation set her heart beating more tumultuously than ever. She walked all the way from Westminster to Brook Green without once reflecting that she might save herself that fatigue by hailing a passing omnibus.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE OLIGARCHY CLUB.

Sydney Campion had done a year's hard and remunerative work since he paid his last visit to Angleford, and the result more than answered his expectations.

When the courts were sitting he was fully absorbed in his briefs; but now and again he took life easily enough—at any rate, so far as the law was concerned. In the autumn it had been his custom to live abroad for a month or two; at Christmas and Easter he invariably found his way to his club in the afternoon, and finished the evening over a rubber of whist.

It was a rare occasion when Sydney was able, in the middle of term, to leave his chambers between three and four o'clock, and stroll in a leisurely way along the Embankment, peacefully smoking a cigar. The chance came to him one sultry day in June. There was no case for him to master, nothing proceeding in which he was specially interested, and he did not feel disposed to sit down and improvise a case for himself, as he used to do in his earlier days. He was minded to be idle; and we may accompany him in his westward walk along the river side to Hungerford Bridge, and up the Avenue to Pall Mall.

On the steps of the Oligarchy Club he found his old friend, Pynsent, just starting for the House. The time was one of great excitement for those who had not lost their interest in the politics of the day. The Irish Land Bill was in Committee, and the Conservatives had strenuously opposed it, fighting, as they knew, a losing battle, yet not without consolations. This very week they had run the Government so close that the transfer of three votes would have put them in a minority; and Sir John Pynsent, who was always a sanguine man, had convinced himself that the Liberal party was on the point of breaking up.

"They are sure to go to pieces," he said to Campion; "and it would be a strange thing if they did not. What Heneage has done already some other Whig with a conscience will do again, and more effectually. You will see we shall be back in office before the year is out. No Ministry and no majority could bear the strain which the Old Man is putting on his followers—it is simply impossible. The worth and birth of the country are sick of this veiled communism that they call justice to Ireland—sick of democratic sycophancy—deadly sick of the Old Man. You mark my words, dear boy: there will be a great revolt against him before many months have passed. I see it working. I find it in the House, in the clubs, in the drawing-rooms; and I don't speak merely as my wishes lead me."

"No doubt you are right as to London; but how about the country?"

"The provinces waver more than the metropolis, I admit; but I don't despair of seeing a majority even in the English boroughs. Ah, Campion, I never see you without saying to myself, 'There goes the man who lost us Dormer.' You would have won that election, I am certain."

"Well," said Sydney, "you know why I could not fight. The will, the money, everything was ready; but——"

"True, I forgot. I beg your pardon!"

"Not at all! But I will fight for you some day—as soon as you like. Bear that in mind, Pynsent!"

"To be sure I will, my dear fellow. We must have you in the House. I have often said so."

And the energetic baronet hurried away, whilst Sydney entered the Club, and made straight for the smoking-room. Here he found others just as eager to predict the downfall of the Government as Sir John Pynsent had been; but he was not in the mood to listen to a number of young men all of the same mind, all of doubtful intellectual calibre, and all sure to say what he had heard a dozen times already. So he passed on to the billiard-room, and finding that a pool was just beginning, took a ball and played.

That served to pass the time until six o'clock, when he went upstairs and read the evening papers for an hour; and at seven he had his dinner and a bottle of wine. Meanwhile he had met two or three friends, with whom he kept up a lively conversation on the events of the day, seasoned by many a pungent joke, and fatal (for the moment) to many a reputation. It is a habit fostered by club life—as, no doubt, it is fostered in the life of the drawing-room, for neither sex is exempt—to sacrifice the repute of one's absent acquaintance with a light heart, not in malice, but more as a parrot bites the finger that feeds it, in sport, or even in affection. If we backbite our friends, we give them free permission to backbite us, or we know that they do it, which amounts to pretty much the same thing. The biting may not be very severe, and, as a rule, it leaves no scars; but, of course, there are exceptions to the rule.

The secret history of almost every man or woman who has mixed at all in polite society is sure to be known by some one or other in the clubs and drawing-rooms. If there is anything to your discredit in your past life, anything which you would blot out if you could with rivers of repentance or expiation, you may be pretty sure that at some time, when you might least expect it, this thing has been, or will be, the subject of discourse and dissection amongst your friends. It may not be told in an injurious or exaggerated manner, and it may not travel far; but none the less do you walk on treacherous shale, which may give way at any moment under your feet. The art of living, if you are afraid of the passing of your secret from the few who know to the many who welcome a new scandal, is to go on walking with the light and confident step of youth, never so much as quailing in your own mind at the thought that the ground may crumble beneath you—that you may go home some fine day, or to your club, or to Lady Jane's five o'clock tea, and be confronted by the grinning skeleton on whom you had so carefully turned your keys and shot your bolts.

No doubt there are men and women so refined and kindly in their nature that they have absolutely no appetite for scandal—never speak it, or listen to it, or remember what they have overheard. Sydney and his friends were troubled by no such qualms, and, if either of them had been, he would not have been so ill-mannered as to spoil sport for the rest.

After dinner they had gone upstairs to the members' smoking room, in a comfortable corner of which they were lazily continuing their conversation. It turned by chance on a certain barrister of Sydney's inn, a Mr. Barrington Baynes, whom one of the party not incorrectly described as "that beautiful, bumptious, and briefless barrister, B. B."

"He gives himself great airs," said Captain Williams, a swaggering, supercilious man, for whom Sydney had no affection, and who was not one of Sydney's admirers. "To hear him talk one would imagine he was a high authority on every subject under the sun, but I suspect he has very little to go upon. Has he ever held a brief, Campion?"

"I never heard of it, if he did. One of those poor devils who take to journalism, and usually end by going to the dogs. You will find his name on the covers of magazines, and I fancy he does something in the reviewing way."

It was an unfortunate speech for Sydney to make, and Captain Williams did not fail to seize his oppportunity of giving the sharp-tongued lawyer—who perhaps knew better how to thrust than to parry in such encounters—a wholesome snub.

Fortune favored him. The current number of *The Decade* was lying on the table beside him. He took it up in a casual sort of way, and glanced at the list of contents.

"By the bye, Campion," he said, "you are not a married man, are you? I see magazine articles now and then signed Lettice Campion; no relation, I suppose."

"That is my sister," Sydney answered, quietly enough. But it was plain that the hit had told; and he was vexed with himself for being so snobbish as to deserve a sneer from a man like Williams.

"I have had the pleasure of meeting Miss Campion two or three times lately at Mrs. Hartley's, in Kensington," said another of the quartette. This was none other than Brooke Dalton, whom Sydney always liked. He spoke in a confidential undertone, with the kindly intention of covering Sydney's embarrassment. "Mrs. Hartley is a cousin of mine; and, though I say it, she brings some very nice people together sometimes. By the way, have you ever seen a man of the name of Walcott—Alan Walcott: a man who writes poetry, and so forth?"

"I know him by name, that is all. I have heard people say he is one of the best poets we have; but I don't pretend to understand our latter-day bards."

"You never met him?"

"No."

"Well, then," said Mr. Dalton, who, though a justice of the peace, and the oldest of the four, could give them all points and beat them as a retailer of gossip; "well, then, that leaves me free to tell you as curious a little history as any I know. But mind, you fellows," he continued, as the others pricked up their ears and prepared to listen, "this is not a story for repetition, and I pledge you to silence before I say another word."

"Honor bright!" said Charles Milton; and the captain nodded his head.

"The facts are these: Five or six years ago, I knew a little of Alan Walcott. I had made his acquaintance in a fortuitous way, and he once did me a good turn by coming forward as a witness in the police court."

"Confession is good for the soul," Milton interjected.

"Well, I was summoned for thrashing a cabman, and I should certainly have been fined if Walcott had not contrived to put the matter in its proper light. For a month or two we saw a good deal of each other, and I rather liked him. He was frank and open in his ways, and though not a well-to-do man, I never observed anything about him that was mean or unhandsome. I did not know that he was married at first, but gradually I put two and two together, and found that he came out now and again to enjoy a snatch of personal freedom, which he could not always make sure of at home.

"Once I saw his wife, and only once. She was a strikingly handsome Frenchwoman, of that bold and flaunting type which generally puts an Englishman on his guard—all paint and powder and cosmetics; you know the style!"

"Not exactly a poetic ideal," said Sydney.

"That is just what I thought at the time; and she seems to have been still less so in character. When I saw her she was terribly excited about some trifle or other—treated Walcott like a dog, without the slightest consideration for his feelings or mine, stood over him with a knife, and ended with a fit of shrieking hysterics."

"Drink or jealousy?" Captain Williams asked.

"Perhaps a little of both. Walcott told me afterwards that that was his daily and nightly experience, and that he was making up his mind to end it. I never knew what he meant by that, but it was impressed upon my memory by the cool sort of way in which he said it, and a quiet look in his eyes which evidently meant mischief. About a fortnight later they went abroad, rather in a hurry; and for some time I heard nothing more of them. Then I went to Aix-les-Bains, and came on the scene just after a frightful row. It seems that a French admirer of hers had followed her to Aix, and attacked Walcott, and even struck him in the hotel gardens. The proprietor and the police had to interfere, and I came across Walcott just as he was looking for some one to act as second. There had been a challenge, and all that sort of thing; and, un-English as it seems, I thought Walcott perfectly right, and acted as his friend throughout the affair. It was in no way a remarkable duel: the French fellow was shot in the arm and got away to Switzerland, and we managed to keep it dark. Walcott was not hurt, and went back to his hotel."

"What did the woman do?" asked Williams, curiously.

"That's the odd part of it. Husband and wife seem to have made it up, for in a day or two they went on to Culoz, had luncheon there, and went out for a walk together. From that walk, Mrs. Alan Walcott did not return. Now comes the mystery: what happened in the course of that walk near Culoz? All that is known is that the landlady saw Walcott returning by himself two or three hours later, and that when she questioned him he replied that madame had taken her departure. What do you think of that for a bit of suggested melodrama?"

"It lacks finish," said Milton.

"I can't see where the poetry comes in," observed the captain.

"It certainly looked black for Walcott," Sydney remarked. "I suppose there was a regular hue and cry—a search for the body, and all that kind of thing?"

"So far as I know, there was nothing of the sort. Nobody seems to have had any suspicion at the time. The peasants at Culoz seemed to have talked about it a little, and some weeks afterwards the English people at Aix-les-Bains got hold of it, and a friend of mine tried to extract information from the landlady. But he was unsuccessful: the landlady could not positively affirm that there was anything wrong. And—perhaps there was not," Mr. Dalton concluded, with a burst of Christian charity which was creditable to him, considering how strong were his objections to Walcott's friendship with Miss Campion.

The captain leaned his head back, sent a pillar of smoke up to the ceiling, and laughed aloud.

"There is no question about it," said Milton, "that Walcott got out of it cheaply. I would not be in his shoes for any money, even now."

"Is this business widely known?" Sydney asked. "It is strange that I never heard anything about it."

He was thinking that the acquaintance of Mr. Alan Walcott could not in any case be a desirable thing for Miss Lettice Campion. From the manner in which Dalton had introduced the subject he felt pretty sure that the attention paid by this man to his sister had been noticed, and that his friend was actuated by a sense of duty in giving him warning as to the facts within his knowledge.

"I don't wonder you never heard of it," said Dalton. "I am not aware of anyone in England who ever did, except myself. I have not mentioned it before, because I am not sure that it is fair to Walcott to do so. But I know you men will not repeat what I have been telling you."

"Not a word," said Captain Williams and Charles Milton, in a breath.

Yet in less than a week from that time the whole story made its appearance in one of the baser personal journals, and people were discussing who the "well-known poet" was, and whether "the buried secret" would presently come to light again.

And Alan Walcott saw the paragraph. and felt that he had not yet quite done with his past, and wondered at the dispensation of Providence which permitted the writers of such paragraphs to live and thrive.

But a good deal was to happen before that paragraph was printed; and in the meantime Dalton and Campion went off to look for partners in a rubber, without supposing for a moment that they had delivered a stab in the back to one who had never done an injury to either of them.

CHAPTER IX.

LETTICE RECEIVES A VISITOR.

THE day following that on which Sydney Campion paid his afternoon visit to his club in Pall Mall was one of considerable importance to his sister Lettice.

She was an early riser, and generally contrived to write half-a-dozen pages of easy translation or straightforward fiction before ten o'clock. That was the hour when she was due in her mother's room, to help her in dressing, and to settle her comfortably in her arm-chair, with her Bible and spectacles at her side, and a newspaper or magazine waiting its turn after the lessons for the day had been read. Mrs. Campion was growing very feeble, both in mind and in body, but she got through her waking hours with a fair amount of satisfaction, thanks to the attention which was paid to all her wants and wishes. Lettice did not suffer anything to interfere with the regular routine which she had marked out for her mother's comfort. She and her maid Milly between them kept the old lady in peace of mind and constant good humor; and if Mrs. Campion still believed that Sydney was their great benefactor, and that it behoved her to comport herself with dignity and grace as the mother of a Lord Chancellor, Lettice did not attempt the hopeless task of undeceiving her.

On this particular day there had been a poor pretence of morning work. She had arranged her papers, the ink and pen were ready to her hand, and a few lines were actually written. But her ideas were all in confusion, and eluded her when she tried to fix them. She could not settle to anything, and instead of writing she found herself drawing figures on the blotting-pad. She knew that of old as a bad symptom, and gave up trying to be industrious. The French window stood open, and the balmy June morning tempted her out into the garden. She picked some flowers for her vases, and pinned a rosebud on the collar of her soft grey dress. It was a simple, straight-flowing dress, of the make which suits every woman best, tall or short, handsome or plain, depending for its beauty on shape and material alone, without any superfluous trimmings; for Lettice had a man's knack of getting her dressmaker to obey orders, and would have scorned to wear and pay for, as a matter of course, whatever trappings might be sent home to her in lieu of what she wanted.

Clearly there were special reasons for her perturbation of mind, and if any other woman had been at her side, and watched her in and out of the house for ten minutes at a time, she would have had no difficulty in divining that Lettice expected a visitor. She would probably go further than this, and draw some confident conclusion as to the kind of welcome likely to be accorded to the visitor; but here, at any rate, the criticism would have been premature. Lettice did expect a visitor—Mr. Alan Walcott to wit; but she had not the slightest notion as to how she should receive him, or whether she would prefer that he should come or stay away.

Her friendship with the poet had grown steadily since their first meeting, and they were now on tolerably familiar terms. His manner had made it impossible for her to doubt that he liked to talk and listen to her, that he sought her company, and even considered himself entitled to her sympathy. But when on the previous day he had gone so far as to assert his title in words, he had done so with what seemed to her remarkable audacity. And, although she had given him permission to come to her house this morning, she was thinking now whether it would not have been better if she had suggested the transfer of the volume of which he spoke at Mrs. Hartley's on the following Sunday, or if she had made her hint still broader by praising the cheapness and despatch of the Parcels Delivery Company.

She had done nothing of this kind. She had been neither rude nor effusive, for it was not in her nature to be either. He was coming "some time after twelve," and in fact, punctually as the clock struck twelve, Mr. Alan Walcott was at the door.

Milly announced him demurely. She observed him carefully, however, as she admitted him into Lettice's room, and studied his card with interest while carrying it to Miss Campion. No man so young and handsome had ever called at Maple Cottage in her time before.

Lettice had been sitting with her mother, and she came down to her study and received her visitor with a frank smile.

"It is really very kind of you," she said, taking the innocent book which he held out as a sort of warrant for his intrusion, "to be at all this trouble. And this is a splendid copy, it reminds me of the volumes my father used to be so fond of. I will take great care of it. How long did you say I might keep it?"

"Till you have read it, at any rate. Or till I ask you for it again—which I don't think I shall. You say that you used to see volumes like this on your father's bookshelves. I should not wonder if you had seen this very book there. It is a strange coincidence that I should have had it in my possession for some time, and yet never noticed until this morning, when I took it down to bring to you, that it had your name on the fly-leaf. Look!"

He opened the book and held the fly-leaf against the window. The name had been rubbed out with a wet finger, after the manner of second-hand booksellers, but the "Lawrence Campion" was still easily legible. Lettice could not restrain a little cry of delight.

"Yes, that is his dear handwriting, I know it so well! And this is his book-plate, too, and his motto—'Vive ut vivas in vitam æternam.' Oh, where did you get the book? But I suppose my father's library was scattered all over the country."

"No doubt it was. I have a few—perhaps twenty—with the same plate. My uncle gave me them. I—a—Miss Campion—I came this morning—"

Apparently he did not quite know why he came, or at any rate he did not find it easy to say. Lettice spoke again in order to relieve his embarrassment, which she did not understand.

"It is so strange that I should have one of his books in my hand again. You can imagine what a grief it was to him when he had to let them go."

"I am so glad to have restored to you something that was your father's. I want you to give me a great pleasure, Miss Campion. These books—there are not more than forty outside—I want you to have them. They are yours, you know, because they were his, and he ought never to have been deprived of them."

"I could not take them, indeed, Mr. Walcott. You are most kind to think of it, but I could not!"

"Why?"

"That is hardly a reasonable question," she said, with a quiet little laugh. "How could I?"

"I see very well how you could, but why should you not? It will be a good deed, and there is no good deed without a sacrifice."

"And you want to sacrifice these books, which are so valuable!"

"No, it is no sacrifice to me, as I could easily prove to you. Believe that it pleases me, and sacrifice your own feelings by taking them."

"I don't see why you should ask me. It is too great a present to make, and—oh, dear me, I am afraid I do not know how to say what I mean! But if you will give me this one book, with my father's name in it, I will take it from you, and thank you very much for it."

"I shall not be satisfied if I may not send the rest. Miss Campion, I came to say——"

Again he stammered and broke down. Lettice, who thought that he had already delivered himself of his mental burden, was a little startled now, especially as he got up and stood by her chair at the window.

"What a lovely little garden!" he said. "Why, you are quite in the country here. What delightful roses! I—I want to say something else, Miss Campion!"

"Yes," said Lettice, faintly, and doing her best to feel indifferent.

"We have not known each other long, but it seems to me that we know each other well—at any rate that I know you well. Before I met you I had never made the acquaintance of a woman who at the same time commanded my respect, called my mind into full play, and aroused my sympathy. These last few months have been the happiest of my life, because I have been lifted above my old level, and have known for the first time what the world might yet be to me. There is something more I want to say to you. I think you know that I have been married—that my wife is—is no more. You may or may not have heard that miserable story, of my folly, and——"

"Oh, no!" cried Lettice, impulsively. "It is true that Mrs. Hartley told me of the great trouble which fell upon you in the loss of which you speak."

"The great trouble—yes! That is how Mrs. Hartley would put it. And the Grahams, have they told you nothing?"

"Nothing more."

A look as of relief passed across his face, followed by a spasm of pain; and he stood gazing wearily through the window.

"Perhaps they do not know, for I have never spoken of it to anyone. But I want to speak; I want to get rid of some of the wretched burden, and an irresistible impulse has brought me here to you. I am utterly selfish; it is like taking your money, or your manuscripts, or your flowers, or anything that you value, to come in this way and almost insist on telling you my sordid story. It is altogether unjustifiable—it is a mad presumption which I cannot account for, except by saying that a blind instinct made me think that you alone, of all the people in this world, could help me if you would!"

Lettice was deeply moved by various conflicting emotions; but there was no hesitation in the sympathy which went out to meet this strange appeal. Even her reason would probably have justified him in his unconventional behavior; but it was sympathy, and not reason, which prompted her to welcome and encourage his confidence.

"If I can help you—if it helps you to tell me anything, please speak."

"I knew I was not mistaken!" he said, with kindling eyes, as he sat down in a low chair opposite to her. "I will not be long—I will not tell you all; that would be useless, and needlessly painful. I married in haste, after a week's acquaintance, the daughter of a French refugee, who came to London in 1870, and earned a living by teaching his language to the poorest class of pupils. Don't ask me why I married her. No doubt I thought it was for love. She was handsome, and even charming in her way, and for some months I tried to think I was happy. Then, gradually, she let me wake from my fool's paradise. I found—you will despise me for a dupe!—that I was not the first man she had pretended to love. Nay, it was to me that she pretended—the other feeling was probably far more of a reality. Before the year was out she had renewed her intimacy with my rival—a compatriot of her own. You will suppose that we parted at once when things came to this pass; but for some time I had only suspicion to go upon. I knew that she was often away from home, and that she had even been to places of amusement in this man's company; but when I spoke to her she either lulled my uneasiness or pretended to be outraged by my jealousy. Soon there was no bond of respect left between us; but as a last chance, I resolved to break up our little home in England, and go abroad. I could no longer endure my life with her. She had ceased to be a wife in any worthy sense of the word, and was now my worst enemy, an object of loathing rather than of love. Still, I remember that I had a gleam of hope when I took her on the Continent, thinking it just possible that by removing her from her old associations, I might win her back to a sense of duty. I would have borne her frivolity; I would have endured to be bound for life to a doll or a log, if only she could have been outwardly faithful.

"Well, to make a long story short, we had not been abroad more than six weeks when this man I have told you about made his appearance on the scene. She must have written to him and asked him to come, at the very moment when she was cheating me with a show of reviving affection; and I own that the meeting of these two one day in the hotel gardens at Aix-les-Bains drove me into a fit of temporary madness. We quarrelled; I sent him a challenge, and we fought. He was not much hurt, and I escaped untouched. The man disappeared, and I have never seen him from that day to this, but I have some reason to think that he is dead."

He paused for a moment or two; and Lettice could not refrain from uttering the words, "Your wife?" in a tone of painful interest.

"My wife?" he repeated slowly. "Ah yes, my wife. Well, after a stormy scene with her, she became quiet and civil. She even seemed anxious to please me, and to set my mind at rest. But she was merely hatching her last plot against me, and I was as great a fool and dupe at this moment as I had ever been before."

And then, with averted face, he told the story of his last interview with her on the hills beyond Culoz. "I will not repeat anything she said," he went on—it was his sole reservation—"although some of her sentences are burned into my brain for ever. I suppose because they were so true."

"Oh, no!" Lettice murmured involuntarily, and looking at him with tear-dimmed eyes. She was intensely interested in his story, and Alan Walcott felt assured by her face that the sympathy he longed for was not withheld.

"My wound was soon healed," he said when the details of that terrible scene were told; "but I was not in a hurry to come back to England. When I did come back, I avoided as much as possible the few people who knew me; and I have never to this moment spoken of my deliverance, which I suppose they talk of as my loss."

"They think," said Lettice, slowly, for she was puzzled in her mind, and did not know what to say, "that you are a widower?"

"And what am I?" he cried, walking up and down the room in a restless way. "Am I not a widower? Has she not died completely out of my life? I shall never see her again—she is dead and buried, and I am free? Ah, do not look at me so doubtfully, do not take back the sympathy which you promised me! Are you going to turn me away, hungry and thirsty for kindness, because you imagine that my need is greater than you thought it five minutes ago? I will not believe you are so cruel!"

"We need not analyze my feelings, Mr. Walcott. I could not do that myself until I have had time to think. But—is it right to leave other people under the conviction that your wife is actually dead, when you know that in all probability she is not?"

"I never said she was dead! I never suggested or acted a lie. May not a man keep silence about his own most sacred affairs?"

"Perhaps he may," said Lettice. "It is not for me to judge you—and at any rate, you have told me!"

She stood up and looked at him with her fearless grey eyes, whilst his own anxiously scanned her face.

"I am very, very sorry for you. If I can do anything to help you, I will. You must not doubt my sympathy, and I shall never withdraw my promise. But just now I cannot think what it would be best to do or say. Let me have time to think."

She held out her hand, and he took it, seeing that she wanted him to go.

"Good-bye!" he said. "God bless you for being what you are. It has done me good to talk. When we meet again—unless you write and give me your commands—I promise to do whatever you may tell me."

And with that, he went away.

CHAPTER X.

THE POET SPEAKS.

As soon as her visitor was gone, Lettice fell into a deep study. She had two things especially to think about, and she began by wondering what Mrs. Hartley would say if she knew that Alan Walcott's wife was alive, and by repeating what he had said to her that morning: that a man was not bound to tell his private affairs to the world. No! she told herself, it was impossible for any man of self-respect to wear his heart on his sleeve, to assume beforehand that people would mistake his position, and to ticket himself as a deserted husband, lest forward girls should waste their wiles upon him.

The thought was odious; and yet she had suggested it to him! Had she not done more than that? Had she not implied that he had done a dishonorable thing in concealing what he was in no way bound to reveal? What would he think of her, or impute to her, for raising such a point at the very moment when he was displaying his confidence in her, and appealing for her sympathy? She blushed with shame at the idea.

He was already completely justified in her mind, for she did not go so far as to put the case which a third person might have put in her own interest. If Alan had been unfair or inconsiderate to anyone, it was surely to Lettice herself. He had spoken familiarly to her, sought her company, confessed his admiration in a more eloquent language than that of words, and asked for a return of sentiment by those subtle appeals which seem to enter the heart through none of the ordinary and ticketed senses. It is true that he had not produced in her mind the distinct impression that she was anything more to him than an agreeable talker and listener in his conversational moods; but that was due to her natural modesty rather than to his self-restraint. He had been impatient, at times, of her slowness to respond, and it was only when he saw whither this impatience was leading him that he resolved to tell her all that she ought to know. It was not his delay, however, that constituted the injustice of his conduct, but the fact of his appealing to her in any way for the response which he had no right to ask.

Lettice was just as incapable of thinking that she had been unjustly treated as she was of believing that Alan Walcott loved her. Thus she was spared the humiliation that might have fallen on her if she had understood that his visit was partly intended to guard her against the danger of giving her love before it had been asked.

Having tried and acquitted her friend, and having further made up her mind that she would write him a letter to assure him of his acquittal, she summoned herself before the court of her conscience; and this was a very different case from the one which had been so easily decided. Then the presumption was all in favor of the accused; now it was all against her. The guilt was as good as admitted beforehand, for as soon as Lettice began to examine and cross-examine herself, she became painfully aware of her transgressions.

What was this weight which oppressed her, and stifled her, and covered her with shame? It was not merely sorrow for the misfortunes of her friend. That would not have made her ashamed, for she knew well that compassion was a woman's privilege, for which she has no reason to blush. Something had befallen her this very morning which had caused her to blush, and it was the first time in all her life that Lettice's cheek had grown red for anything she had done, or thought, or said, or listened to, in respect of any man whatever. Putting her father and brother on one side, no man had had the power, for very few had had the opportunity, to quicken the pulses in her veins as they were quickened now. She had not lived to be six and twenty years old without knowing what love between a man and woman really meant, but she had never appropriated to herself the good things which she saw others enjoying. It was not for want of being invited to the feast, for several of her father's curates had been ready to grace their frugal boards by her presence, and to crown her with the fillets of their dignity and self-esteem. The prospect held up to her by these worthy men had not allured her in any way; she had not loved their wine and oil, and thus she had remained rich, according to the promise of the seer, with the bread and salt of her own imaginings.

It would be wrong to suppose that Lettice had no strong passions, because she had never loved, or even thought that she loved. The woman of cultivated mind is often the woman of deepest feeling; her mental strength implies her calmness, and the calm surface indicates the greatest depth. It is in the restless hearts which beat themselves against the shores of the vast ocean of womanhood that passion is so quick to display itself, so vehement in its shallow force, so broken in its rapid ebb. The real strength of humanity lies deep below the surface; but a weak woman often mistakes for strength her irresistible craving for happiness and satisfaction. It is precisely for this reason that a liberal education and a full mind are even more essential to the welfare of a woman than they are to the welfare of a man. The world has left its women, with this irresistible craving in their hearts, dependent, solitary, exposed to attack, and unarmed for defence; and as a punishment it has been stung almost to death by the scorpions which its cruelty generates. But a woman who has been thoroughly educated, a woman of strong mind and gentle heart, is not dependent for happiness on the caprice of others, or on the abandonment of half the privileges of her sex, but draws from an inexhaustible well to which she has constant access.

So Lettice, with the passions of her kind, and the cravings of her sex, had been as happy as the chequered circumstances of her outer life would permit; but now for the first time her peace of mind was disturbed, and she felt the heaving of the awakened sea beneath.

Why had her heart grown cold when she heard that Alan Walcott's wife was still alive? Why had her thought been so bitter when she told herself that she had no right to give the man her sympathy? Why had the light and warmth and color of life departed as soon as she knew that the woman whom he had married, however unworthy she might be, was the only one who could claim his fidelity? Alas, the answer to her questions was only too apparent. The pain which it cost her to awake from her brief summer's dream was her first admonition that she had dreamed at all. Not until she had lost the right to rejoice in his admiration and respond to his love, did she comprehend how much these things meant to her, and how far they had been allowed to go.

The anguish of a first love which cannot be cherished or requited is infinitely more grievous when a woman is approaching the age of thirty than it is at seventeen or twenty. The recoil is greater and the elasticity is less. But if Lettice suffered severely from the sudden blow which had fallen upon her, she still had the consolation of knowing that she could suffer in private, and that she had not betrayed the weakness of her heart—least of all to him who had tried to make her weak.

In the course of the evening she sat down and wrote to him—partly because he had asked her to write, and partly in order that she might say without delay what seemed necessary to be said.

"DEAR MR. WALCOTT,—After you were gone this morning I thought a great deal about all that you said to me, and as you asked me for my opinion, and I promised to give it, perhaps I had better tell you what I think at once. I cannot see that you are, or have been, under any moral compulsion to repeat the painful events of your past life, and I am sorry if I implied that I thought you were. Of course, you may yourself hold that these facts impose a certain duty upon you, or you may desire that your position should be known. In that case you will do what you think right, and no one else can properly decide for you.

"I was indeed grieved by your story. I wish it was in my power to lessen your pain; but, as it is not, I can only ask you to believe that if I could do so, I would.

"You will be hard at work, like myself (as you told me), during the next few months. Is not hard work, after all, the very best of anodynes? I have found it so in the past, and I trust you have done so too, and will continue to do so.

"Believe me, dear Mr. Walcott, yours very sincerely,

"LETTICE CAMPION."

She hesitated for some time as to whether she had said too much, or too little, or whether what she had said was expressed in the right way. But in the end she sent it as it was written.

Then, if she had been a thoroughly sensible and philosophical young woman, she would have forced herself to do some hard work, by way of applying the anodyne of which she had spoken. But that was too much to expect from her in the circumstances. What she actually did was to go to bed early and cry herself to sleep.

She had not considered whether her letter required, or was likely to receive an answer, and she was therefore a little surprised when the postman brought her one on the afternoon of the following day. Not without trepidation, she took it to her room and read it.

"DEAR MISS CAMPION"—so the letter began—"I thank you very much for your kindness. I have learned to find so much meaning in your words that I think I can tell better than anyone else how to interpret the spirit from the letter of what you say. So, when you tell me that no one can decide for me what it is my duty to do, I understand that, if you were in my position at this moment, you would rather desire that it should be known. Henceforth I desire it, and I shall tell Mrs. Hartley and Mrs. Graham as much as is necessary the next time I see them. This will be equivalent to telling the world—will it not?

"Two other things I understand from your letter. First, that you do not wish to meet me so often in future; and, second, that though you know my pain would be diminished by the frank expression of your sympathy, and though you might find it in your heart to be frankly sympathetic, yet you do not think it would be right, and you do not mean to be actively beneficent. Am I wrong? If I am, you must forgive me; but, if I am not, I cannot accept your decision without entering my protest.

"Think, my dear friend—you will allow me that word!—to what you condemn me if you take your stand upon the extreme dictates of conventionality. You cannot know what it would mean to me if you were to say, 'He is a married man, and we had better not meet so frequently in future.' To you, that would be no loss whatever. To me, it would be the loss of happiness, of consolation, of intellectual life. Listen and have pity upon me! I could not say it to your face, but I will say it now, though you may think it an unpardonable crime. You have become so necessary to me that I cannot contemplate existence without you. Have you not seen it already—or, if you have not, can you doubt when you look back on the past six months—that respect has grown into affection, and affection into love? Yes, I love you, Lettice!—in my own heart I call you Lettice every hour of the day—and I cannot live any longer without telling you of my love.

"When I began this letter I did not mean to tell you—at any rate not to-day. Think of the condition of my mind when I am driven by such a sudden impulse—think, and make allowance for me!

"I am not sure what I expected when I resolved to make my sad story known to you. Perhaps, in my madness, I thought, 'There is a right and a wrong above the right and wrong of society's judgments; and she is on the higher levels of humanity, and will take pity on my misfortunes.' I only say, perhaps I thought this. I don't know what I thought. But I knew I could not ask you to be my wife, and I determined that you should know why I could not.

"Oh, how I hate that woman! I believe that she is dead. I tell myself every day that she is dead, and that there is nothing to prevent me from throwing myself at your feet, and praying you to redeem me from misery. Is not my belief enough to produce conviction in you? No—you will not believe it; and, perhaps, if you did, you would not consent to redeem me. No! I must drag my lengthening chain until I die! I must live in pain and disgust, bound to a corpse, covered with a leprosy, because the angel whose mission it is to save me will not come down from her heaven and touch me with her finger.

"You shall not see these words, Lettice—my dear Lettice! They are the offspring of a disordered brain. I meant to write you such a calm and humble message, telling you that your counsel was wise—that I would follow it

—that I knew I had your sympathy, and that I reverenced you as a saint. If I go on writing what I do not mean to send, it is only because the freedom of my words has brought me peace and comfort, and because it is good that I should allow myself to write the truth, though I am not allowed to write it to *you!*

"Not allowed to write the truth to you, Lettice? That, surely, is a blasphemy! If I may not write the truth to you, then I may not know you—I may not worship you—I may not give my soul into your keeping.

"I will test it. My letter shall go. You will not answer it—you will only sit still, and either hate or love me; and one day I shall know which it has been. "ALAN."

Whilst Lettice read this wild and incoherent letter, she sank on her knees by her bedside, unable in any other attitude to bear the strain which it put upon her feelings.

"How dare he?" she murmured, at the first outbreak of his passionate complaint; but, as she went on reading, the glow of pity melted her woman's heart, and only once more she protested, in words, against the audacious candor of her lover.

"How could he?"

And as she finished, and her head was bowed upon her hands, and upon the letter which lay between them, her lips sought out the words which he had written last of all, as though they would carry a message of forgiveness and consolation to the spirit which hovered beneath it.

CHAPTER XI.

SYDNEY GIVES ADVICE.

THE day after Sydney Campion had heard Brooke Dalton's story of the disappearance of Alan Walcott's wife had been a very busy one for him. He had tried to get away from his work at an early hour, in order that he might pay one of his rare visits to Maple Cottage, and combine with his inquiries into the welfare of his mother certain necessary cautions to his sister Lettice. It was indispensable that she should be made to understand what sort of man this precious poet was known to be, and how impossible it had become that a sister of his should continue to treat him as a friend.

Why, the fellow might be—probably was—a murderer! And, if not that, at all events there was such a mystery surrounding him, and such an indelible stain upon his character, that he, Sydney Campion, could not suffer her to continue that most objectionable acquaintance.

But his duties conspired with his dinner to prevent the visit from being made before the evening, and it was nearly eight o'clock when he arrived at Hammersmith. He had dined with a friend in Holborn, and had taken a Metropolitan train at Farringdon Street, though, as a rule, he held himself aloof from the poison-traps of London, as he was pleased to call the underground railway, and travelled mostly in the two-wheeled gondolas which so lightly float on the surface of the stream above.

As he was about to leave the station, his eye encountered a face and figure which attracted him, and made him almost involuntarily come to a standstill. It was Milly Harrington, Lettice's maid, who, having posted her mistress' letter to Alan Walcott, had turned her listless steps in this direction.

Milly's life in London had proved something of a disappointment to her. The cottage on Brook Green was even quieter than the Rectory at Angleford, where she had at least the companionship of other servants, and a large acquaintance in the village. Lettice was a kind and considerate mistress, but a careful one: she did not let the young country-bred girl go out after dark, and exercised an unusual amount of supervision over her doings. Of late, these restrictions had begun to gall Milly, for she contrasted her lot with that of servants in neighboring houses, and felt that Miss Lettice was a tyrant compared with the easy-going mistresses of whom she heard. Certainly Miss Lettice gave good wages, and was always gentle in manner and ready to sympathize when the girl had bad news of her old grandmother's health; but she did not allow Milly as much liberty as London servants are accustomed to enjoy, and Milly, growing learned in her rights by continued comparison, fretted against the restraints imposed upon her.

She might have "kept company" with the milkman, with the policeman, with one of the porters at the station: for these, one and all, laid their hearts and fortunes at her feet; but Milly rejected their overtures with scorn. Her own prettiness of form and feature had been more than ever impressed upon her by the offers which she refused; and she was determined, as she phrased it, "not to throw herself away."

Her fancy that "Mr. Sydney" admired her had not been a mistaken one. Sydney had always been susceptible to the charms of a pretty face; and Nature had preordained a certain measure of excuse for any man who felt impelled to look twice at Milly, or even to speak to her on a flimsy pretext. And Milly was on Nature's side, for she did not resent being looked at or spoken to, although there was more innocence and ignorance of evil on her side than men were likely to give her credit for. Therefore Sydney had for some time been on speaking terms with her, over and above what might have been natural in an occasional visitor to the Rectory and Maple Cottage. He saw and meant no harm to her in his admiration, and had no idea at present that his occasional smile or idle jesting compliment made the girl's cheeks burn, her heart beat fast, made her nights restless and her days long. He took it for granted that gratified vanity alone made her receive his attentions with pleasure. His gifts—for he could be lavish when he liked—were all, he thought, that attracted her. She was a woman, and could, no doubt, play her own game and take care of herself. She had her weapons, as other women had. Sydney's opinion of women was, on the whole, a low one; and he had a supreme contempt for all women of the lower class—a contempt which causes a man to look on them only as toys—instruments for his pleasure—to be used and cast aside. He believed that they systematically preyed on men, and made profit out of their weakness. That Milly was at a disadvantage with him, because she was weak and young and unprotected, scarcely entered his head. He would have said that she had the best of it. She was pretty and young, and could make him pay for it if he did her any harm. She was one of a class—a class of harpies, in his opinion—and he did not attribute any particular individuality to her at all.

But Milly was a very real and individual woman, with a nature in which the wild spark of passion might some day be roused with disastrous results. It is unsafe to play with the emotions of a person who is simply labelled, often mistakenly and insufficiently, in your mind as belonging to a class, and possessing the characteristics of that class. There is always the chance that some old strain of tendency, some freak of heredity, may develop in the way which is most of all dangerous to you and to your career. For you cannot play with a woman's physical nature without touching, how remotely soever, her spiritual constitution as well; and, as Browning assures us, it is indeed "an awkward thing to play with souls, and matter enough to save one's own."

Sydney Campion, however, concerned himself very little with his own soul, or the soul of anybody else. He went up to Milly and greeted her with a smile that brought the color to her face.

"Well, Milly," he said, "are you taking your walks abroad to-night? Is your mistress pretty well? I was just going to Maple Cottage."

"Yes, sir, mistress is pretty well; but I don't think Miss Lettice is," said Milly, falling back into her old way of speaking of the rector's daughter. "She mentioned that she was going to bed early. You had better let me go back first and open the door for you."

"Perhaps it would be best. Not well, eh? What is the matter?"

"I don't know, but I think Miss Campion has a bad headache. I am sure she has been crying a great deal." Milly said this with some hesitation.

"I am sorry to hear that."

"I am afraid Mr. Walcott brought her bad news in the morning, for she has not been herself at all since he left."

"Do you say that Mr. Walcott was there this morning?"

Sydney spoke in a low tone, but with considerable eagerness, so that the girl knew she had not thrown her shaft in vain.

"Milly, this concerns me very much. I must have a little talk with you, but we cannot well manage it here. See! there is no one in the waiting-room; will you kindly come with me for a minute or two? It is for your mistress' good that I should know all about this. Come!"

So they went into the dreary room together, and they sat down in a corner behind the door, which by this time was almost dark. There Sydney questioned her about Alan Walcott, with a view to learning all that she might happen to know about him. Milly required little prompting, for she was quite ready to do all that he bade her, and she told him at least one piece of news which he was not prepared to hear.

Five minutes would have sufficed for all that Milly had to say; but the same story may be very long or very short according to the circumstances in which it is told. Half-an-hour was not sufficient to-night: at any rate, it took these two more than half-an-hour to finish what they had to say. And even then it was found that further elucidations would be necessary in the future, and an appointment was made for another meeting. But the talk had turned on Milly herself, and Milly's hopes and prospects, before that short half-hour had sped.

"Good-night, Milly," said Sydney, as they left the station. "You are a dear little girl to tell me so much. Perhaps you had better not say to your mistress that you saw me to-night. I shall call to-morrow afternoon. Good-night, dear."

He kissed her lightly, in a shadowy corner of the platform, before he turned away; and thought rather admiringly for a minute or two of the half-frightened, half-adoring eyes that were riveted upon his face. "Poor little fool!" he said to himself, as he signalled a cab. For even in that one short interview he had mastered the fact that Milly was rather fool than knave.

The girl went home with a light heart, believing that she had done a service to the mistress whom she really loved, and shyly, timorously joyous at the thought that she had met at last with an admirer—a lover, perhaps!—such as her heart desired. Of course, Miss Lettice would be angry if she knew; but there was nothing wrong in Mr. Sydney's admiration, said Milly, lifting high her little round white chin; and if he told her to keep silence she was bound to hold her tongue.

This was a mean thing that Sydney had done, and he was not so hardened as to have done it without a blush. Yet so admirably does our veneer of civilization conceal the knots and flaws beneath it that he went to sleep in the genuine belief that he had saved his sister from a terrible danger, and the name of Campion from the degradation which threatened it.

On the next day he reached Maple Cottage between four and five o'clock.

"How is your mistress?" he said to Milly.

She had opened the door and let him in with a vivid blush and smile, which made him for a moment, and in the broad light of day, feel somewhat ashamed of himself.

"Oh, sir, she is no better. She has locked herself in, and I heard her sobbing, fit to break her heart," said Milly, in real concern for her mistress' untold grief.

"Let her know that I am here. I will go to Mrs. Campion's room."

"Well, mother!" he said, in the hearty, jovial voice in which he knew that she liked best to be accosted, "here is your absentee boy again. How are you by this time?"

"Not very bright to-day, Sydney," said his mother. "I never am very bright now-a-days. But what are you doing, my dear? Are you getting on well? Have they——"

"No, mother, they have not made me Lord Chancellor yet. We must wait a while for that. But I must not complain; I have plenty of work, and my name is in the papers every day, and I have applied for silk, and—have you found your spectacles yet, mother?"

Details of his life and work were, as he knew, absolutely unmeaning to Mrs. Campion.

"Oh, the rogue! He always teased me about my speccles," said Mrs. Campion, vaguely appealing to an unseen audience. "It is a remarkable thing, Sydney, but I put them down half an hour ago, and now I cannot find them anywhere."

"Well, now, that is strange, Mrs. Campion; but not very unusual. If I remember right, you had lost your spectacles when I was here last; and as I happened to pass a good shop this morning, it occurred to me that you would not object to another pair of pebbles. So here they are; and I have bought you something to test them with."

He produced a cabinet portrait of himself, such as the stationers were beginning to hang on the line in their shop windows. The fact marked a distinct advance in his conquest of popularity; and Sydney was not mistaken in supposing that the old lady would appreciate this portrait of her handsome and distinguished son. So, with her spectacles and her picture, Mrs. Campion was happy.

When Sydney's knock came to the door, Lettice was still crouching by her bedside over the letter which had reached her an hour before. She sprang up in nervous agitation, not having recognized the knock, and began to bathe her face and brush her hair. She was relieved when Milly came and told her who the caller was; but even Sydney's visit at that moment was a misfortune. She was inclined to send him an excuse, and not come down; but in the end she made up her mind to see him.

"My dear child," Sydney said, kissing her on the cheek, "how ill you look! Is anything the matter?"

"No, nothing. Don't take any notice of me," Lettice said, with a significant look at her mother.

They conversed for a time on indifferent matters, and then Sydney asked her to show him the garden. It was evident that he wanted to speak to her privately, so she took him into her study; and there, without any beating about the bush, he began to discharge his mind of its burden.

"I want to talk to you seriously, Lettice, and on what I'm afraid will be a painful subject; but it is my manifest duty to do so, as I think you will admit before I go. You are, I believe, on friendly terms—tolerably familiar terms—with Mr. Walcott?"

This was in true forensic style; but of course Sydney could not have made a greater mistake than by entering solemnly, yet abruptly, on so delicate a matter. Lettice was in arms at once.

"Stay a moment, Sydney. You said this was to be a painful subject to me, and then you mention the name of Mr. Walcott. I do not understand."

"Well!" said Sydney, somewhat disconcerted; "I don't know what made me conclude that it would be painful. I did not mean to say that. I am very glad it is not so."

He stopped to cough, then looked out of the window, and softly whistled to himself. Lettice, meanwhile, cast about hastily in her mind for the possible bearing of what her brother might have to say. She was about to take advantage of his blunder, and decline to hear anything further; but for more than one reason which immediately occurred to her, she thought that it would be better to let him speak.

"I do not think you could have any ground for supposing that such a subject would be specially painful to me; but never mind that. What were you going to say?"

Now it was Sydney's turn to be up in arms, for he felt sure that Lettice was acting a part.

"What I know for a fact," he said, "is that you have seen a good deal of Mr. Walcott during the past six months, and that people have gone so far as to remark on your—on his manifest preference for your company. I want to say that there are grave reasons why this should not be permitted to go on."

Lettice bit her lip sharply, but said nothing.

"Do you know," Sydney continued, becoming solemn again as he prepared to hurl his thunderbolts, "that Mr. Walcott is a married man?"

"Whether I know it or not, I do not acknowledge your right to ask me the question."

"I ask it by the right of a brother. Do you know that if he is not a married man, he is something infinitely worse? That the last time his wife was seen in his company, they went on a lonely walk together, and he came back again without her?"

"How do you know this?" Lettice asked him faintly. He set down her agitation to the wrong cause, and thought that his design was succeeding.

"I know it from the man who was most intimately connected with Walcott at the time. And I heard it at my club—in the course of the same conversation in which your name was mentioned. Think what that means to me! However, it may not have gone too far if we are careful to avoid this man in future. He does not visit here, of course?"

"He has been here."

"You surely don't correspond?"

"We have corresponded."

"Good heavens! it is worse than I thought But you will promise me not to continue the acquaintance?"

"No, I cannot promise that!"

"Not after all I have told you of him?"

"You have told me nothing to Mr. Walcott's discredit. I have answered your questions because you are, as you reminded me, my brother. Does it not strike you that you have rather exceeded your privilege?"

Sydney was amazed at her quiet indifference.

"I really cannot understand you, Lettice. Do you mean to say that you will maintain your friendship with this man, although you know him to be a——"

"Well?"

"At any rate, a *possible* murderer?"

"The important point," said Lettice coldly, "seems to be what Mr. Walcott is actually, not what he is possibly. Your 'possible' is a matter of opinion, and I am very distinctly of opinion that Mr. Walcott is an innocent and honorable man."

"If you believe him innocent, then you believe that his wife is living?"

"I know nothing about his wife. That is a question which does not concern me."

"Your obstinacy passes my comprehension." When Sydney said this, he rose from the chair in which he had been sitting and stood on the hearth-rug before the grate, with his hands behind him and his handsome brows knitted in a very unmistakable frown. It was in a lower and more regretful voice that he continued, after a few minutes' silence: "I must say that the independent line you have been taking for some time past is not very pleasing to me. You seem to have a perfect indifference to our name and standing in the world. You like to fly in the face of convention, to——"

"Oh, Sydney, why should we quarrel?" said Lettice, sadly. Hitherto she had been standing by the window, but she now came up to him and looked entreatingly into his face. "Indeed, I will do all that I can to satisfy you. I am not careless about your prospects and standing in the world; indeed, I am not. But they could not be injured by the fact that I am earning my own living as an author. I am sure they could not!"

"You say that you will do all you can to satisfy me," said Sydney, who was not much mollified by her tenderness. "Will you give up the acquaintance of that man?"

"I am not certain that I shall ever see Mr. Walcott again; but if you ask me whether I will promise to insult him if I do see him, or to cut him because he has been accused of dishonorable acts, then I certainly say, No!"

"How you harp upon his honor! The honor of a married man who has introduced himself to you under a false name!"

"What do you mean?" said Lettice, starting and coloring. "Are there any more charges against him?"

"You seem to be so well prepared to defend him that perhaps you will not be surprised to hear that his name is not Walcott at all, but Bundlecombe, and that his mother kept a small sweet-stuff shop, or something of that kind, at Thorley. Bundlecombe! No wonder he was ashamed of it!"

This shaft told better than either of the others. Lettice was fairly taken aback. The last story did not sound as if it had been invented, and Sydney had evidently been making inquiries. Moreover, there flashed across her mind the remembrance of the book which Alan Walcott had given her—only yesterday morning. How long ago it seemed already! Alan Bundlecombe! What did the name signify, and why should any man care to change the name that he was born with? She recollected Mrs. Bundlecombe very well—the old woman who came and took her first twenty pounds of savings; the widow of the bookseller who had bought part of her father's library. If he was her son, he might not have much to be proud of, but why need he have changed his name?

Decidedly this was a blow to her. She had no defence ready, and Sydney saw that she was uncomfortable.

"Well," he said, "I must not keep you any longer. I suppose, even now"—with a smile—"you will not give me your promise; but you will think over what I have told you, and I dare say it will all come right."

Her eyes were full of wistful yearning as she put her hand on his shoulder and kissed him.

"You believe that I *mean* to do right, don't you, Sydney?" she asked.

He laughed a little. "We all mean to do right, my dear. But we don't all go the same way to work, I suppose. Yes, yes; I believe you mean well; but do, for heaven's sake, try to act with common-sense. Then, as I said, everything will come right in the end."

He went back to his mother's room, and Lettice stood for some minutes looking out of the window, and sighing for the weariness and disillusion which hung like a cloud upon her life.

"All will come right?" she murmured, re-echoing Sydney's words with another meaning. "No. Trouble, and sorrow, and pain may be lived down and forgotten; but without sincerity *nothing* can come right!"

BOOK III.

AMBITION.

"I count life just a stuff
To try the soul's strength on, educe the man,
Who keeps one end in view makes all things serve."

ROBERT BROWNING.

CHAPTER XII.

ALAN WALCOTT.

Alan Walcott knew perfectly well that he had done a mad, if not an unaccountable thing in writing his letter to Miss Campion. He knew it, that is to say, after the letter was gone, for when he was writing it, and his heart was breaking through the bonds of common-sense which generally restrained him, he did not feel the difficulty of accounting either for his emotions or for his action. The wild words, as he wrote them, had for him not only the impress of paramount truth, but also the sanction of his convictions and impulse at the moment. No stronger excuse has been forthcoming for heroic deeds which have shaken the world and lived in history.

Who amongst us all, when young and ardent, with the fire of generosity and imagination in the soul, has not written at least one such letter, casting reserve and prudence to the winds, and placing the writer absolutely at the mercy of the man or woman who received it?

This man was a poet by nature and by cultivation; but what is the culture of a poet save the fostering of a distempered imagination? I do not mean the culture of a prize poet, or a poet on a newspaper staff, or a gentleman who writes verses for society, or a professor of poetry, or an authority who knows the history and laws of prosody in every tongue, and can play the bard or the critic with equal facility. Alan Walcott had never ceased to work in distemper, because his nature was distempered to begin with, and his taste had not been modified to suit the conventional canons of his critics. Therefore it was not much to be wondered at if his prose poem to the woman he loved was a distempered composition.

The exaltation of the mood in which he had betrayed himself to Lettice was followed by a mood of terrible depression, and almost before it would have been possible for an answer to reach him, even if she had sat down and written to him without an hour's delay, he began to assure himself that she intended to treat him with silent contempt —that his folly had cost him not only her sympathy but her consideration, and that there was no hope left for him.

He had indeed told her that he did not expect a reply; but now he tortured himself with the belief that silence on her part could have only one explanation. Either she pitied him, and would write to prevent his despair, or she was indignant, and would tell him so, or else she held him in such contempt that she would not trouble herself to take the slightest notice of his effusion. He craved for her indignation now as he had craved for her sympathy before; but he could not endure her indifference.

A man of five-and-thirty whose youth has been spent amongst the prodigal sons and daughters of the world's great family, who has wasted his moral patrimony, and served masters and mistresses whom he despised, is not easily brought to believe that he can be happy again in the love of a pure woman. He has lost confidence in his own romantic feelings, and in his power to satisfy the higher needs of a woman's delicate and exacting heart. Usually, as was once the case with Walcott, he is a cynic and a professed despiser of women, affecting to judge them all by the few whom he has met, in spite of the fact that he has put himself in the way of knowing only the weakest and giddiest of the sex. But when such a man, gradually and with difficulty, has found a pearl among women, gentle and true, intellectual yet tenderly human, with whom his instinct tells him he might spend the rest of his life in honor and peace, he is ready in the truest sense to go and sell all that he has in order to secure the prize. Nothing has any further value for him in comparison with her, and all the roots of his nature lay firm hold upon her. Alas for this man if his mature love is given in vain, or if, like Alan Walcott, he is debarred from happiness by self-imposed fetters which no effort can shake off!

For four-and-twenty hours he struggled with his misery. Then, to his indescribable joy, there came a message from Lettice.

It was very short, and it brought him bad news; but at any rate it proved that she took an interest in his welfare, and made him comparatively happy.

"I think you should hear"—so it began, without any introductory phrase—'that the story you told me of what happened at Aix-les-Bains is known to men in this country who cannot be your friends, since they relate it in their own fashion at their clubs, and add their own ill-natured comments. Perhaps if you are forewarned you will be forearmed.

"LETTICE CAMPION."

Not a word as to his letter; but he was not much troubled on this score. That she had written to him at all, and written evidently because she felt some concern for his safety, was enough to console him at the moment.

When he began to consider the contents of her note it disturbed him more than a little. He had not imagined that his secret, such as it was, had passed into the keeping of any other man, still less that it had become club-talk in London. He saw at once what evil construction might be put upon it by malicious gossip-mongers, and he knew that henceforth he was face to face with a danger which he could do little or nothing to avert.

What should he attempt in his defence? How should he use the weapon which Lettice had put into his hand by forewarning him? One reasonable idea suggested itself, and this was that he should tell the true story to those who knew him best, in order that they might at any rate have the power to meet inventions and exaggerations by his own version of the facts. He busied himself during the next few days in this melancholy task, calling at the house of his friends, and making the best pretext he could for introducing his chapter of autobiography.

He called on the Grahams, amongst others, and was astonished to find that they knew the story already.

"I have told the facts to one or two," he said, "for the reason that I have just mentioned to you, but I think they understood that it would do me no good to talk about it, except in contradiction of unfriendly versions. How did you hear it?"

Graham took out of his pocket a copy of *The Gadabout* and said,

"I'm afraid you have made enemies, Walcott, and if you have not seen this precious concoction it would be no kindness to you to conceal it. Here—you will see at a glance how much they have embellished it."

Walcott took the paper, and read as follows :—

"It is probable that before long the public may be startled by a judicial inquiry into the truth of a story which has been told with much circumstantiality concerning the remarkable disappearance of the wife of a well-known poet some three or four years ago."

Then came the details, without any mention of persons or places, and the paragraph concluded in this fashion. "It is not certain how the matter will come into court, but rumor states that there is another lady in the case, that the buried secret came to light in a most dramatic way, and that evidence is forthcoming from very unexpected quarters."

The victim of this sorry piece of scandal gazed at the paper in a state of stupefaction.

"Of course," said Graham, "it is not worth while to notice that rag. Half of what it says is clearly a downright invention. If only you could get hold of the writer and thrash him, it might do some good ; but these liars are very hard to catch. As to the 'other lady,' there is nothing in that, is there ? "

Both Graham and his wife looked anxiously at Walcott. They knew of his attentions to Lettice, and were jealous of him on that account ; and they had been discussing with each other the possibility of their friend's name being dragged into a scandal.

Walcott was livid with rage.

"The cur !" he cried ; "the lying hound ! He has entirely fabricated the beginning and the end of this paragraph. There is no ground whatever for saying that a case may come into court. There is no 'lady in the case' at all. He has simply put on that tag to make his scrap of gossip worth another half-crown. Is it not abominable, Graham ? "

"It is something more than abominable. To my mind this sort of thing is one of the worst scandals of the present day. But I felt sure there was nothing in it, and the few who guess that it refers to you will draw the same conclusion. Don't think any more about it ! "

"A lie sticks when it is well told," said Walcott, gloomily. "There are plenty of men who would rather believe it than the uninteresting truth."

But the Grahams, relieved on the point that mainly concerned them, could not see much gravity in the rest of the concoction, and Walcott had scant pity from them. He went home disconsolate, little dreaming of the reception which awaited him there.

He occupied a floor in Montagu Place, Bloomsbury, consisting of three rooms: a drawing-room, a bed-room, and a small study; and, latterly, Mrs. Bundlecombe, whose acquaintance the reader has already made, had used a bedroom at the top of the house.

Alan's mother and Mrs. Bundlecombe had been sisters. They were the daughters of a well-to-do farmer in Essex, and, as will often happen with sisters of the same family, brought up and cared for in a precisely similar way, they had exhibited a marked contrast in intellect, habits of thought, and outward bearing. The one had absorbed the natural refinement of her mother, who had come of an old Huguenot family long ago settled on English soil; the other was moulded in the robust and coarse type of her father. Bessy was by preference the household factotum not to say the drudge of the family, with a turn for puddings, poultry, and the management of servants. Lucy clung to her mother, and books (though both were constant students of *The Family Herald*), and was nothing if not romantic. Both found some one to love them, and both, as it happened, were married on the same day. Their parents had died within a year of each other, and then the orphaned girls had come to terms with their lovers, and accepted a yoke of which they had previously fought shy. Bessy's husband was a middle-aged bookseller in the neighboring town of Thorley, who had admired her thrifty and homely ways, and had not been deterred by her want of intelligence. Lucy, though her dreams had soared higher, was fairly happy with a schoolmaster from Southampton, whose acquaintance she had made on a holiday at the seaside.

Alan, who was the only offspring of this latter union, had been well brought up, for his father's careful teaching and his mother's gentleness and imagination supplied the complementary touches which are necessary to form the basis of culture. The sisters had not drifted apart after their marriage so much as might have been expected. They had visited each other, and Alan, as he grew up, conceived a strong affection for his uncle at Thorley, who—a childless man himself—gave him delightful books, and showed him others still more delightful, who talked to him on the subjects which chiefly attracted him, and was the first to fire his brain with an ambition to write and be famous. Aunt Bessy was tolerated for her husband's sake, but it was Uncle Samuel who drew the lad to Thorley. In due time Alan began to teach in his father's school, and before he was twenty-one had taken his degree at London University. Then his mother died, and shortly afterwards he was left comparatively alone in the world.

Now, school-keeping had never been a congenial occupation to Alan, whose poetic temperament was chafed by the strict and ungrateful routine of the business. His father had been to the manner born, and things had prospered with him, but Alan by himself would not have been able to achieve a like success. He knew this, and was proud of his incapacity; and he took the first opportunity of handing over the establishment to a successor. The money which he received for the transfer, added to that which his father had left, secured him an income on which it was possible to live, and to travel, and to print a volume of poems. For a short time, at least, he lived as seemed best in his own eyes, and was happy.

When he was in England he still occasionally visited Thorley; and it was thus that Milly Harrington came to know him by sight. Her grandmother did not know the Bundlecombes, but Milly came to the conclusion that Alan was their son, and this was the tale which she had told to Sydney Campion, and which Sydney had repeated to his sister.

The last visit paid by Alan to Thorley was some time after his uncle's death, and he had then confided to his aunt the story of his marriage, and of its unfortunate sequel. He happened to have learned that the man with whom he had fought at Aix-les-Bains was back in London, and it seemed not improbable at that moment that he would soon hear news of his fugitive wife. When he mentioned this to the widow—who was already taking steps to sell her stock-in-trade—she immediately conceived the idea that her boy, as she called Alan, was in imminent danger, that the wife would undoubtedly turn up again, and that it was absolutely necessary for his personal safety that he should have an intrepid and watchful woman living in the same house with him. So she proposed the arrangement which now existed, and Alan had equably fallen in with her plan. He did not see much of her when she came to London, and there was very little in their tastes which was congenial or compatible; but she kept him straight in the matter of his weekly bills and his laundress, and he had no desire to quarrel with the way in which she managed these affairs for him.

When Alan came home after his call at the Grahams', weary and disconsolate, with a weight on his mind of which he could not rid himself, the door was opened by his aunt. Her white face startled him, and still more the gesture with which she pointed upstairs, in the direction of their rooms. His heart sank at once, for he knew that the worst had befallen him.

"Hush!" said his aunt in a hoarse whisper, "do not go up. She is there. She came in the morning and would not go away."

"How is she? I mean what does she look like?"

He was very quiet; but he had leaned both hands upon the hall table, and was gazing at his aunt with despairing eyes.

"Bad, my boy, bad! The worst that a woman can look. Oh, Alan, go away, and do not come near her. Fly, immediately, anywhere out of her reach! Let me tell her that you have gone to the other end of the world rather than touch her again. Oh, Alan, my sister's child!—go, go, and grace abounding be with you."

"No, Aunt Bessy, that will never do. I cannot run away. Why, don't you see for one thing that this will prove what lies they have been telling about me? They said I was a murderer—" he laughed somewhat wildly as he spoke—"and here is the murdered woman. And they said there was evidence coming to prove it. Perhaps she will tell them how it happened, and how she came to life again. There, you see, there is good in everything—even in ghosts that come to life again!"

Then his voice dropped, and the color went out of his face.

"What is she doing?" he asked, in a sombre tone.

"She went to sleep on the sofa in the drawing-room. She made me send out for brandy, and began to rave at me in such a way that I was bound to do it, just to keep her quiet. And now she is in her drunken sleep!"

Alan shuddered. He knew what that meant.

"Come," he said: "let us go up. We cannot stand here any longer."

They went into his study, which was on the same floor as the drawing-room, and here Alan sank upon a chair, looking doggedly at the closed door which separated him from the curse of his existence. After a while he got up, walked across the landing, and quietly opened the door.

There she lay, a repulsive looking woman, with the beauty of her youth corrupted into a hateful mask of vice. She had thrown her arms above her head and seemed to be fast asleep.

He returned to the study, shut the door again, and sat down at the table, leaning his head upon his hands. Aunt Bessy came and sat beside him—not to speak, but only that he might know he was not alone.

"That," he muttered to himself at last, "is my wife!"

The old woman at his side trembled, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"I am beginning to know her," he said, after another long pause. "Some men discover the charms of their wives before marriage; others—the fools—find them out after. In the first year she was unfaithful to me. Then she shot me like a dog. What will the end be?"

"It can be nothing worse, my boy. She has ruined you already; she cannot do it twice. Oh, why did you ever meet her! Why did not Heaven grant that a good woman, like Lettice Campion——"

"Do not name her here!" he cried sharply. "Let there be something sacred in the world!"

He looked at his aunt as he spoke; but she did not return his gaze. She was sitting rigid in her chair, staring over his shoulder with affrighted eyes. Alan turned round quickly, and started to his feet.

The woman in the other room had stealthily opened the door, and stood there, disheveled and half-dressed, with a cunning smile on her face.

"Alan, my husband!" she said, in French, holding out both hands to him, and reeling a step nearer, "here we are at last. I have longed for this day, my friend—let us be happy. After so many misfortunes, to be reunited once again! Is it not charming?"

She spoke incoherently, running her words into one another, and yet doing her best to be understood.

Alan looked at her steadily. "What do you want?" he asked. "Why have you sought me out?"

"My faith, what should I want? Money, to begin with."

"And then?"

"And then—justice! Bah! Am I not the daughter of Testard, who dispensed with his own hand the justice of Heaven against his persecutors?"

"I have heard that before," Alan said. "It was at Aix-les-Bains. And you *still* want justice!"

"Justice, my child. Was it not at Aix-les-Bains that you tried to kill Henri de Hauteville? Was it not in the park hard by that you shot at me, and almost assassinated me? But, have no fear! All I ask is money— the half of your income will satisfy me. Pay me that, and you are safe—unless my rage should transport me one of these fine days! Refuse, and I denounce you through the town, and play the game of scandal—as I know how to play it! Which shall it be?"

"You are my wife. Perhaps there is a remedy for that—now that you are here, we shall see! But, meanwhile, you have a claim. To-morrow morning I will settle it as you wish. You shall not be left to want."

"It is reasonable. Good-night, my friend! I am going to sleep again."

She went back into the drawing-room, laughing aloud, whilst Alan, after doing his best to console Mrs. Bundlecombe, departed in search of a night's lodging under another roof.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIR JOHN PYNSENT PROPHESIES.

On a sultry evening in the middle of August a few choice spirits were gathered together in one of the smoking-rooms of the Oligarchy.

All but one were members of the Upper or Lower House, and they were lazily enjoying the unusual chance (for such busy men, and at such a critical period of the session) which enabled them to smoke their cigars in Pall Mall before midnight on a Tuesday. Either there had been a count-out, or there was obstruction in the House, which was no immediate concern of theirs, or they had made an arrangement with their Whip, and were awaiting a telegram which did not come ; but, whatever the reason, here they were, lazy and contented.

There was our old friend, Sir John Pynsent; and Charles Milton, Q.C., certain to be a law officer or a judge, as soon as the Conservatives had their chance ; and Lord Ambermere ; and the Honorable Tom Willoughby, who had been trained at Harrow, Oxford, and Lord's Cricket Ground, and who was once assured by his Balliol tutor that his wit would never make him a friend, nor his face an enemy. The last of the circle was Brooke Dalton, of whom this narrative has already had something to record.

"So Tourmaline has thrown up the sponge, Pynsent?" Charles Milton began, after a short pause in the conversation. "Had enough of the Radical crew by this time!"

"Yes. Of course, he has been out of sympathy with them for a long while. So have twenty or thirty more, if the truth were known."

"As you know it!" Dalton interjected.

"Well, I know some things. The line of cleavage in the Liberal party is tolerably well marked, if you have eyes to see."

"Why does Tourmaline leave the House? I hear he would stand an excellent chance if he went to Vanebury and started as an Independent."

"No doubt he would; but in a weak moment he pledged himself down there not to do it."

"What hard lines!" said Tom Willoughby. "Just one pledge too many!"

"And so," continued Pynsent, without noticing the interruption, "we have had to look out for another candidate. I settled the matter this afternoon, and I am glad to say that Campion has promised to go down."

"Just the man for the job," said Milton, who looked upon Sydney as sure to be a formidable rival in Parliament, and more likely than any other young Conservative to cut him out of the Solicitorship.. "He has tongue, and he has tact—and he has something else, Sir John, which is worth the two put together—good friends!"

"We think very highly of Campion," said Sir John Pynsent, "and I am very glad you confirm our opinion."

"I certainly think he will make his mark," said Dalton. "He comes of a very able family."

Dalton found himself recalling the appearance and words of Miss Lettice Campion, whom he had met so often of late at the house of his cousin, Mrs. Hartley, and who had made a deeper impression than ever on his mind. Impressions were somewhat fugitive, as a rule, on Brooke Dalton's mind; but he had come to admire Lettice with a fervor unusual with him.

"From all I can learn," said the baronet, "we ought to win the seat; and every two new votes won in that way are worth half-a-dozen such as Tom Willoughby's, for instance, whose loyalty is a stale and discounted fact."

"Oh, yes, I know that is how you regard us buttresses from the counties! I declare I will be a fifth party, and play for my own hand."

"It isn't in you, my boy," said Lord Ambermere; "I never knew you play for your own hand yet."

"Then what am I in Parliament for, I should like to know?"

"For that very thing, of course; to learn how to do it."

Willoughby laughed good-naturedly. He did not object to be made a butt of by his intimate friends.

"Seriously, Tom, there is plenty of work for a fellow like you to do."

It was Pynsent who spoke, and the others were always ready to lend him their ears when he evidently wanted to be listened to.

"The main thing is to get hold of the Whigs, and work at them quietly and steadily until the time comes to strike our blow. The great Houses are safe, almost to a man. When it comes to choosing between Democracy rampant, with Gladstone at its head, assailing the most sacred elements of the Constitution, and a great National Party, or Union of Parties, guarding Property and the Empire against attack, there is no question as to how they will make their choice. But if every Whig by birth or family ties came over to us at once, that would not suffice for our purpose. What we have to do is get at the —— the Decent Men of the Liberal Party, such as the aldermen, the shipowners, the great contractors and directors of companies, and, of course, the men with a stake in the land. No use mentioning names—we all know pretty well who they are."

"And when you have got at them?" asked Willoughby.

"Why, lay yourself out to please them. Flatter them—show them all the attention in your power; take care that they see and hear what is thought in the highest quarters about the present tendency of things—about Ireland, about the Empire, about the G. O. M. Let them understand how they are counted on to decide the issue, and what they would have to look for if we were once in power. Above all, ride them easy! It is impossible that they should become Tories—don't dream of such a thing. They are to be Liberals to the end of their days, but Liberals with an Epithet."

"Imperi——"

"No, no, no, no, my dear boy! Any number of noes. You must not live so much in the past. The great idea to harp upon is Union. Union against a common enemy. Union against Irish rebels. Union against Gladstone and the Democracy; but draw this very mild until you feel that you are on safe ground. Union is the word, and Unionist is the Epithet. Liberal Unionists. That is the inevitable phrase, and it will fit any crisis that may arise."

"But suppose they dish us with the County franchise?"

"We must make a fight over that; but for my part I am not afraid of franchises. There is a Tory majority to be picked out of manhood suffrage, as England will surely discover some day. Possibly the County franchise must be cleared out of the way before we get our chance. What will that mean? Why, simply that Gladstone will think it necessary to use his first majority in order to carry some great Act of Confiscation; to make Hodge your master; or to filch a bit of your land for him; or to join hands with Parnell and cut Ireland adrift. Then we shall have our opportunity; and that is what we have to prepare for."

Lord Ambermere, and Dalton, and Milton, Q.C., nodded their heads. They had heard all this before; but to Willoughby it was new, for he had only just begun to put himself into the harness of political life.

"How can we help ourselves," he said, "if the laborers have returned a lot of new men, and there is a big Liberal majority?"

"That is the point, of course. Well, put it at the worst. Say that Gladstone has a majority of eighty, without Parnell, and say that Parnell can dispose of eighty. Say, again, that the Irishmen are ready to support Gladstone, in the expectation of favors to come. Now let the Old Man adopt either a Nationalist policy or an out-and-out Democratic policy, and assume that the Union for which we have been working takes effect. In order to destroy Gladstone's majority of one hundred and sixty, at least eighty of his nominal followers must come over. Of these, the pure Whigs will count for upwards of forty, and another forty must be forthcoming from the men I have just described. That is putting it at the worst—and it is safer to do so. Now the question is, Tom Willoughby, what can you do, and whom can you tackle? I don't want you to give me an answer, but only to think it over."

"Oh, if you only want thinking, I'm the beggar to think. But—suppose you land your alderman, and he don't get re-elected in 1885 or thereabouts? That would be a frightful sell, don't you know!"

"Why, that is just where the beauty of the plan comes in! A seat in the House of Commons will always be more or less of a vested interest, however low the franchise may descend; and the men we are speaking of are precisely those most likely to continue in the House. It is especially so in the case of very wealthy men, who have made their own money; for they look out for comfortable seats to begin with, and then nurse their constituencies by large charitable donations, so that the chances are all in their favor. At any rate this is the best way of setting to work—and who can tell whether the struggle may not come to a crisis in the present Parliament?"

"And you feel as confident as ever, Sir John, that this Union will be effected?"

"My dear Lord Ambermere, I assure you I am more confident than ever, and if I were at liberty to say all I know, and to show my private memoranda, you would be astonished at the progress which has been made in this Confederation of Society against the Destructive Elements."

It was a great comfort in listening to Sir John Pynsent, that one could always tell where he wanted to bring in his capital letters. And there was no doubt at all about the uncial emphasis with which he spoke of the Confederation of Society against the Destructive Elements."

At this moment Sydney Campion came in and the conclave was broken up.

Sydney was full of excitement about his contest at Vanebury, and he received the congratulations and good wishes of his friends with much complacency. He was already the accepted Conservative candidate, being nominated from the Oligarchy Club in response to an appeal from the local leaders. He had even been recommended by name in a letter from Mr. Tourmaline, the retiring member, whose secession to the Conservative party had demoralized his former friends in the constituency, and filled his old opponents with joy. He was going down the next day to begin his canvass, and to make his first speech; and he had come to the Club to-night for a final consultation with Sir John Pynsent.

This Vanebury election would not, there was reason to think, be so much affected by money-bags as the election at Dormer was supposed to be, sixteen or eighteen months before. Yet money was necessary, and Sydney did not on this occasion refuse the aid which was pressed upon him. He was responding to the call of his party, at a moment which might be (though it was not) very inconvenient for him; and, having put down the foot of dignity last year, he could now hold out the hand of expediency with a very good grace.

So he took his money, and went down, and before he had been in Vanebury six hours the Conservatives there understood that they had a very strong candidate, who would give a good account of himself, and who deserved to be worked for.

His personal presence was imposing. Sydney was above the middle height, erect and broad-shouldered, with a keen and handsome, rather florid, face, a firm mouth, and penetrating steel-blue eyes. He was careful of his appearance, too, and from his well-cut clothes and his well-trimmed brown hair, beard, and whiskers, it was easy to see that there was nothing of the slipshod about this ambitious young emissary from the Oligarchy Club.

In manner he was very persuasive. He had a frank and easy way of addressing an audience, which he had picked up from a popular tribune—leaning one shoulder towards them at an angle of about eighty degrees, and rounding his periods with a confidential smile, which seemed to assure his hearers that they were as far above the average audience as he was above the average candidate. He did not feel the slightest difficulty in talking for an hour at a stretch, and two or three times on the same day; and, indeed, it would have been strange if he had, considering his Union experience at Cambridge and his practice at the Bar.

Sydney won upon all classes at Vanebury, and the sporting gentlemen in that thriving borough were soon giving odds upon his chance of success. The Liberals were for the most part careless and over-confident. Their man had won every election for twenty years past, and they could not believe that this Tory lawyer was destined to accomplish what all the local magnates had failed in attempting. But a few of the wisest amongst them shook their heads, for they knew too well that "Tourmaline the Traitor and Turncoat" (as the posters described him) was by no means alone in his discontent with the tendencies of the party.

The attention of the country was fixed upon the Vanebury election, and Sydney Campion had become at once the observed of all observers. He knew it, and made the most of the situation, insisting in his speeches that this was a test-election, which would show what the country thought of the government, of its bribes to ignorance and its capitulation to rebellion, of its sacrifice of our honor abroad and our interests at home. He well knew what the effect of this would be on his friends in London, and how he would have earned their gratitude if he could carry the seat on these lines.

On the day before the poll, Sir John Pynsent came to Vanebury, to attend the last of the public meetings.

"Admirably done, so far!" he said, as he grasped Sydney's hand at the station. "How are things looking?"

"It is a certain win!" said Sydney. "No question about it."

And a win it was, such as any old campaigner might have been proud of. The numbers as declared by the returning officer were:

Campion (C.)	4765
Hawkins (L.)	4564
Majority	201

At the last election Tourmaline had had a majority of six hundred over his Conservative opponent, so that there had been a turnover of about four hundred voters. And no one doubted that a large number of these had made up their minds to turn since Campion had begun his canvass.

This was a complete success for Sydney. He was now Mr. Campion, M.P., with both feet on the ladder of ambition. Congratulations poured in upon him from all sides, and from that moment he was recognized by everybody as one of the coming men of the Conservative party.

CHAPTER XIV.

SYDNEY MAKES A MISTAKE.

THERE was a social side to Sydney's success which he was not slow to appreciate. A poor and ambitious man, bent on climbing the ladder of promotion, he was willing to avail himself of every help which came in his way. And Sir John Pynsent was good-naturedly ready to give him a helping hand.

During the past season he had found himself welcome in houses where the best society of the day was wont to congregate. He had several invitations for the autumn to places where it was considered a distinction to be invited; and, being a man of much worldly wisdom, he was disposed to be sorry that he had made arrangements to go abroad for two or three months. He was vague in detailing his plans to his friends; but in his own mind he was never vague, and he knew what he meant to do and where he was going to spend the vacation well enough, although he did not choose to take club acquaintances into his confidence.

But one invitation, given by Sir John Pynsent, for the Sunday subsequent to his election—or rather, from Saturday to Monday—he thought it expedient as well as pleasant to accept. Vanebury was a very few miles distant from St. John's country-house, and when the baronet, in capital spirits over his friend's success, urged him to run over to Culverley for a day or two, he could not well refuse.

"I am going for the Sunday," Sir John said confidentially, "but my wife doesn't expect me to stay longer until the session is over. I run down every week, you know, except when she's in town; but she always leaves London in June. My sister is under her wing, and she declares that late hours and the heat of London in July are very bad for girls. Of course, I'm glad that she looks after my sister so well."

Sydney recognized the fact that he had never before been taken into Sir John's confidence with respect to his domestic affairs.

"Lady Pynsent asked me the other day whether I could not get you to come down to us," Sir John continued. "I am always forgetting her messages; but if you can spare a couple of days now, we shall be very glad to have you. Indeed, you must not refuse," he said, hospitably. "And you ought to see something of the county."

Sydney had met Lady Pynsent in town. She was a large, showy-looking woman, with fair hair and a very aquiline nose; a woman who liked to entertain, and who did it well. He had dined at the Wentworths' house more than once, and he began to search in his memory for any face or figure which should recall Sir John's sister to his mind. But he could not remember her, and concluded, therefore, that she was in no way remarkable.

"I think I have not met Miss Pynsent," he took an opportunity of saying, by way of an attempt to refresh his memory.

"No? I think you must have seen her somewhere. But she did not go out much this spring: she is rather delicate, and not very fond of society. She's my half-sister, you know, considerably younger than I am—came out the season before last."

Another acquaintance of Sydney's privately volunteered the information later in the day that Miss Pynsent had sixty thousand pounds of her own, and was reputed to be clever.

"I hate clever women," Sydney said, with an inward growl at his sister Lettice, whose conduct had lately given him much uneasiness. "A clever woman and an heiress! Ye gods, how very ugly she must be."

His friend laughed in a meaning manner, and wagged his head mysteriously. But what he would have said remained unspoken, because at that moment Sir John rejoined them.

Sydney flattered himself that he was not impressible, or at least that the outward trappings of wealth and rank did not impress him. But he was distinctly pleased to find that Sir John's carriage and pair, which met them at the station, was irreproachable, and that Culverley was a very fine old house, situated in the midst of a lovely park and approached by an avenue of lime-trees, which, Sir John informed him, was one of the oldest in the country. Sydney had an almost unduly keen sense of the advantage which riches can bestow, and he coveted social almost as much as professional standing for himself. It was, perhaps, natural that the son of a poor man, who had been poor all his life, and owed his success to his own brains and his power of continued work, should look a little enviously on the position so readily attained by men of inferior mental calibre, but of inherited and ever-increasing influence, like Sir John Pynsent and his friends. Sydney never truckled: he was perfectly independent in manner and in thought; but the good things of the world were so desirable to him that for some of them—as he confessed to himself with a half-laugh at his own weakness—he would almost have sold his soul.

They arrived at Culverley shortly before dinner, and Sydney had time for very few introductions before going to the dining-room. He was surprised to find a rather large party present. There were several London men and women whom he knew already, and who were staying in the house, and there was a contingent of county people, who had only come to dinner. The new member for Vanebury was made much of, especially by the county folk; and as Sydney was young, handsome, and a good talker, he soon made himself popular amongst them. For himself, he did not find the occasion interesting, save as a means of social success. Most of the men were dull, and the women prim and proper: there were not more than two pretty girls in the whole party.

"That's the heiress, I suppose," thought Sydney, hearing a spectacled, sandy-haired young woman who looked about five-and-twenty addressed as Miss Pynsent. "Plain, as I thought. There's not a woman here worth looking at, except Mrs. George Murray. I'll talk to her after dinner. Not one of them is a patch on little Milly. I wonder how she would look, dressed up in silks and satins. Pynsent knows how to choose his wine and his cook better than his company, I fancy."

But his supercilious contempt for the county was well veiled, and the people who entered into conversation with Sydney Campion, the new M.P. for Vanebury, put him down as a very agreeable man, as well as a rising politician.

His own position was pleasant enough. He was treated with manifest distinction—flattered, complimented, well-nigh caressed. In the drawing-room after dinner, Sydney, surrounded by complacent and adulating friends, really experienced some of the most agreeable sensations of his life. He was almost sorry when the group gradually melted away, and conversation was succeeded by music. He had never cultivated his taste for music, but he had a naturally fine ear, upon which ordinary drawing-room performances jarred sadly. But, standing with his arms folded and his back against the wall, in the neighborhood of Mrs. George Murray, the prettiest woman in the room, he became gradually aware that Lady Pynsent's musicians were as admirable in their way as her cook. She would no more put up with bad singing than bad songs; and she probably put both on the same level. She did not ask amateurs to sing or play; but she had one or two professionals staying in the house, who were "charmed" to perform for her; and she had secured a well-known "local man" to play accompaniments. In the case of one at least of the professionals, Lady Pynsent paid a very handsome fee for his services; but this fact was not supposed to transpire to the general public.

When the professionals had done their work there was a little pause, succeeded by the slight buzz that spoke of expectation. "Miss Pynsent is going to play," Mrs. Murray said to Sydney, putting up her long-handled eyeglass and looking expectantly towards the grand piano. "Oh, now, we shall have a treat."

"Sixty thousand pounds," Sydney said to himself with a smile; but he would not for the world have said it aloud. "We must put up with bad playing from its fortunate possessor, I suppose." And he turned his head with resignation in the direction of the little inner drawing-room, in which the piano stood. This room should, perhaps, be described as an alcove, rather than a separate apartment: it was divided from the great drawing-room by a couple of shallow steps that ran across its whole width, so that a sort of natural stage was formed, framed above and on either side by artistically festooned curtains of yellow brocade.

"Isn't it effective?" Mrs. Murray murmured to him, with a wave of her eyeglass to the alcove. "So useful for tableaux and plays, you know. Awfully clever of Lady Pynsent to use the room in that way. There used once to be folding doors, you know—barbarous, wasn't it? Who *would* use doors when curtains could be had?"

"Doors are useful sometimes," said Sydney. But he was not in the least attentive either to her words or to his own: he was looking towards the alcove.

Miss Pynsent—the young woman with sandy locks and freckled face, on which a broad, good-humored smile was beaming—was already seated at the piano and turning over her music. Presently she began to play, and Sydney, little as was his technical knowledge of the art, acknowledged at once that he had been mistaken, and that Miss Pynsent, in spite of being an heiress, played remarkably well. But the notes were apparently those of an accompaniment only—was she going to sing? Evidently not, for at that moment another figure slipped forward from the shadows of the inner drawing-room, and faced the audience.

This was a girl who did not look more than eighteen or nineteen: a slight fragile creature in white, with masses of dusky hair piled high above a delicate, pallid, yet unmistakably beautiful, face. The large dark eyes, the curved, sensitive mouth, the exquisite modelling of the features, the graceful lines of the slightly undeveloped figure, the charming pose of head and neck, the slender wrist bent round the violin which she held, formed a picture of almost ideal loveliness. Sydney could hardly refrain from an exclamation of surprise and admiration. He piqued himself on knowing a little about everything that was worth knowing, and he had a considerable acquaintance with art, so that the first thing which occurred to him was to seek for a parallel to the figure before him in the pictures with which he was acquainted. She was not unlike a Sir Joshua, he decided; and yet—in the refinement of every feature, and a certain sweetness and tranquillity of expression—she reminded him of a Donatello that he had seen in one of his later visits to Florence or Sienna. He had always thought that if he were ever rich he would buy pictures; and he wondered idly whether money would buy the Donatello of which the white-robed violin-player reminded him.

One or two preliminary tuning notes were sounded, and then the violinist began to play. Her skill was undoubted, but the feeling and pathos which she threw into the long-drawn sighing notes were more remarkable even than her skill. There was a touch of genius in her performance which held the listeners enthralled. When she had finished, she disappeared behind the curtains as rapidly as she had emerged from the shadows of the dimly-lighted inner room; and in the pause that followed, the opening and shutting of a door was heard.

"Who is she?" said Sydney to his neighbor.

"Oh, Miss Pynsent, of course," said Mrs. Murray. "Delightful, isn't she?"

"I don't mean Miss Pynsent," said Sydney, in some confusion of mind; "I mean——"

But Mrs. Murray had turned to somebody else, and scraps of conversation floated up to Sydney's ears, and gave him, as he thought, the information that he was seeking.

"So devoted to Lady Pynsent's children! Now that little Frankie has a cold, they say she won't leave him night or day. They had the greatest trouble to get her down to play to-night. Awfully lucky for Lady Pynsent," and then the voices were lowered, but Sydney heard something about "the last governess," and "a perfect treasure," which seemed to reveal the truth.

"The governess! A violin-playing governess," he thought, with a mixture of scorn and relief, which he did not altogether understand in himself. "Ah! that's the reason she did not come down to dinner. She is a very pretty girl, and no doubt Lady Pynsent keeps her in the nursery or school-room as much as possible. I should like to see her again. Perhaps, as to-morrow is Sunday, she may come down with the children."

It will be evident to the meanest capacity that Sydney was making an absurd mistake as to the identity of the violinist. The most unsophisticated novel-reader in the world would cast contempt and ridicule on the present writers if they, in their joint capacity, introduced the young lady in white as actually Lady Pynsent's governess. To avoid misunderstanding on the point, therefore, it may as well be premised that she was in fact Miss Anna Pynsent, Sir John's half sister, and that Mr. Campion's conclusions respecting her position were altogether without foundation.

Having, however, made up his mind about her, Sydney took little further interest in the matter. One or two complimentary remarks were made in his hearing about Miss Pynsent's playing; but he took them to apply to the sandy-haired Miss Pynsent whom he had seen at dinner, and only made a silent cynical note of the difference with which the violinist and the accompanist were treated. He never flew in the face of the world himself, and therefore he did not try to readjust the balance of compliment: he simply acquiesced in the judgment of the critics, and thought of the Donatello.

A long conference in the smoking-room on political matters put music and musicians out of his head; and when he went to sleep, about two o'clock in the morning, it was to dream, if he dreamt at all, of his maiden speech in Parliament, and that elevation to the woolsack which his mother was so fond of prophesying.

Sydney was an early riser, and breakfast on Sundays at Culverley was always late. He was tempted by the beauty of the morning to go for a stroll in the gardens; and thence he wandered into the park, where he breathed the fresh cool air with pleasure, and abandoned himself, as usual, to a contemplation of the future. The park was quickly crossed, for Sydney scarcely knew how to loiter in his walking, more than in any other of his actions; and he then plunged into a fir plantation which fringed a stretch of meadow-land, now grey and drenched with dew and shining in the morning sun. Even to Sydney's unimaginative mind the scene had its charm, after the smoke of London and the turmoil of the last few days: he came to the edge of the plantation, leaned his elbows on the topmost rail of a light fence, and looked away to the blue distance, where the sheen of water and mixture of light and shade were, even in his eyes, worth looking at. A cock crowed in a neighboring farmyard, and a far-away clock struck seven. It was earlier than he had thought.

Two or three figures crossing the meadow attracted his attention. First came a laboring man with a pail. Sydney watched him aimlessly until he was out of sight. Then a child—a gentleman's child, judging from his dress and general appearance—a boy of six or seven, who seemed to be flying tumultuously down the sloping meadow to escape from his governess or nurse. The field ran down to a wide stream, which was crossed at one point by a plank, at another by stepping-stones; and it was towards these stepping-stones that the boy directed his career. Behind him, but at considerable distance, came the slender figure of a young woman, who seemed to be pursuing him. The child reached the stream, and there stood laughing, his fair curls floating in the wind, his feet firmly planted on one of the stones that had been thrown into the water.

Sydney was by no means inclined to play knight-errant to children and attendant damsels, and he would probably have continued to watch the little scene without advancing, had not the girl, halting distressfully to call the truant, chanced to turn her face so that the strong morning light fell full upon it. Why, it was the violinist! Or was he deceived by some chance resemblance? Sydney did not think so, but it behoved him instantly to go and see.

Indeed, before he reached the stream, his help seemed to be needed. The boy, shouting and dancing, had missed his footing and fallen headlong in the stream, which, fortunately, was very shallow and not very swift. Sydney quickened his pace to a run, and the girl did the same; but before either of them reached its bank the boy had scrambled out again, and was sitting on the further side with a sobered countenance and in a very drenched condition.

"Oh, Jack!" said the girl reproachfully, "how *could* you?"

"I want some mushrooms. I said I would get them," Jack answered, sturdily.

"You must come back at once. But—how are you to get over?" she said, contemplating the slippery stones with some dismay. For Jack's fall had displaced more than one of them, and there was now a great gap between the stones in the deepest part of the little stream.

"Can I be of any assistance?" said Sydney, availing himself of his opportunity to come forward.

She turned and looked at him inquiringly, the color deepening a little in her pale face.

"I am staying at Culverley," he said, in an explanatory tone. "I had the pleasure of hearing you play last night."

"You are Mr. Campion, I think?" she said. "Yes, I shall be very glad of your help. I need not introduce myself, I see. Jack has been very naughty: he ran away from his nurse this morning, and I said that I would bring him back. And now he has fallen into the brook."

"We must get him back," said Sydney, rather amused at her matter-of-fact tone. "I will go over for him."

"No, I am afraid you must not do that," she answered. "There is a plank a little further down the stream; we will go there."

But Sydney was across the water by this time. He lifted the child lightly in his arms and strode back across the stones, scarcely wetting himself at all. Then he set the boy down at her side.

"There!" he said, "that is better than going down to the plank. Now, young man, you must run home again as fast as you can, or you will catch cold."

"I am very much obliged to you," said the young lady, looking at him, as he thought, rather earnestly, but without a smile. "Jack, you know, is Sir John Pynsent's eldest son."

"So I divined. I think he would get home more quickly if I took one of his hands and you took the other, and we hurried him up the hill; don't you think so?"

He had no interest at all in Jack, but he wanted to talk with this dark-eyed violin-playing damsel. Sydney had indulged in a good deal of flirtation in his time, and he had no objection to whiling away an hour in the company of any pretty girl; and yet there was some sort of dignity about this girl's manner which warned him to be a little upon his guard.

"You are member for Vanebury," she said, rather abruptly, when they had dragged little Jack some distance up the grassy slope.

"I have that honor."

"I hope," she said, with a mixture of gentleness and decision which took him by surprise, "that you mean to pay some attention to the condition of the working-classes in Vanebury?"

"Well, I don't know; is there any special reason?"

"They are badly paid, badly housed, over-worked and under-educated," she said, succinctly; "and if the member for Vanebury would bestir himself in their cause, I think that something might be done."

"Even a member is not omnipotent, I'm afraid."

"No, but he has influence. You are bound to use it for good,'' she returned.

Sydney raised his eyebrows. He was not used to being lectured on his duties, and this young lady's remarks struck him as slightly impertinent. He glanced at her almost as if he would have told her so; but she looked so very pretty and so very young that he could no more check her than he could have checked a child.

"You have very pretty scenery about here," he said, by way of changing the conversation.

The girl's face drooped at once; she did not answer.

"What an odd young woman she is,'' said Sydney to himself. "What an odd governess for the children!"

Suddenly she looked up, with a very sweet bright look. "I am afraid I offended you," she said, deprecatingly. "I did not mean to say anything wrong. I am so much interested in the Vanebury working people, although we are here some miles distant from them, that when I heard you were coming I made up my mind at once that I would speak to you."

"You have—friends, perhaps, in that district?" said Sydney.

"N—no—not exactly," she said, hesitating. "But I know a good deal about Vanebury."

"Nan goes there very often, don't you, Nan?" said little Jack, suddenly interposing. "And papa says you do more harm than good."

"Nan" colored high. "You should not repeat what papa says," she answered, severely. "You have often been told that it is naughty."

"But it's true," Jack murmured, doggedly. And Sydney could not help smiling at the discomfited expression on "Nan's" face.

However, he was—or thought he was—quite equal to the occasion. He changed the subject, and began talking adroitly about her tastes and occupations. Nan soon became at ease with him, and answered his questions cheerfully, although she seemed puzzled now and then by the strain of compliment into which he had a tendency to fall. The house was reached at last; and Jack snatched his hands from those of his companions, and ran indoors. Nan halted at a side-door, and now spoke with the sweet earnestness that impressed Sydney even more than her lovely face.

"You have been very kind to us, Mr. Campion. I don't know how to thank you."

It was on the tip of Sydney's tongue to use some badinage such as he would have done, in his light and easy fashion, to a servant-maid or shop-girl. But something in her look caused him, luckily, to refrain. He went as near as he dared to the confines of love-making.

"Give me the flower you wear," he said, leaning a little towards her. "Then I shall at least have a remembrance of you."

His tone and his look were warmer than he knew. She shrank back, visibly surprised, and rather offended. Before he could add a word she had quietly taken the rosebud from her dress, handed it to him, and disappeared into the house, closing the door behind her in a somewhat uncompromising way. Sydney was left alone on the gravelled path, with a half-withered rosebud in his hand, and a consciousness of having made himself ridiculous.

"She seems to be rather a little vixen," he said to himself, as he strolled up to his rooms to make some change in his clothes, which were damper than he liked. "What business has a pretty little governess to take that tone? Deuced out of place, I call it. I wonder if she'll be down to breakfast. She has very fetching eyes."

But she was not down to breakfast, and nothing was said about her, so Sydney concluded that her meals were taken in the schoolroom with the children.

"Such a pity—poor dear Nan has a headache," he heard Lady Pynsent saying by and by. "I hoped that she would come down and give us some music this evening, but she says she won't be able for it."

Sydney consoled himself with pretty Mrs. Murray.

"The fair violinist is out of tune, it seems," he said, in the course of an afternoon stroll with the new charmer.

"Who? Oh, Nan Pynsent."

"Pynsent? No. At least, I don't mean the pianiste: I mean the young lady who played the violin last night."

"Yes, Nan Pynsent, Sir John's half-sister. The heiress—and some people say the beauty of the county. Why do you look so stupefied, Mr. Campion?"

"I did not know her, that was all. I thought—who, then, is the lady who played the piano?"

"Mary Pynsent, a cousin. You surely did not think that *she* was the heiress?"

"Why did not Sir John's sister come down to dinner?" said Sydney, waxing angry.

"She has a craze about the children. Their governess is away, and she insists on looking after them. She is rather quixotic, you know; full of grand schemes for the future, and what she will do when she comes of age. Her property is all in Vanebury, by the bye: you must let her talk to you about the miners if you want to win her favor. She will be of age in a few months."

"I shall not try to win her favor."

"Dear me, how black you look, Mr. Campion. Are you vexed that you have not made her acquaintance?"

"Not at all," said Sydney, clearing his brow. "How could I have looked at her when you were there?"

The banal compliment pleased Mrs. Murray, and she began to talk of trivial matters in her usual trivial strain. Sydney scarcely listened: for once he was disconcerted, and angry with himself. He knew that he would have talked in a very different strain if he had imagined for one moment that Jack's companion was Miss Pynsent. He had not, perhaps, definitely *said* anything that he could regret; but he was sorry for the whole tone of his conversation. Would Miss Pynsent repeat his observations, he wondered, to her sister-in law? Sydney did not often put himself in a false position, but he felt that his tact had failed him now. He returned to the house in an unusually disturbed state of mind; and a sentence which he overheard in the afternoon did not add to his tranquillity.

He was passing along a corridor that led, as he thought, to his own room; but the multiplicity of turnings had bewildered him, and he was obliged to retrace his steps. While doing so, he passed Lady Pynsent's boudoir. Although he was unconscious of this fact, his attention was attracted by the sound of a voice from within. Nan Pynsent's voice was not loud, but it had a peculiarly penetrating quality; and her words followed Sydney down the corridor with disagreeable distinctness.

"Selina," she was saying—Selina was Lady Pynsent's name— "I thought you said that Mr. Campion was a *gentleman!*"

"Well, dear——" Lady Pynsent was beginning; but Sydney, quickening his steps, heard no more. He was now in a rage, and disposed to vote Miss Pynsent the most unpleasant, conceited young person of his acquaintance. That anybody should doubt his "gentilhood" was an offence not to be lightly borne. He was glad to remember that he was leaving Culverley next day, and he determined that he would rather avoid the female Pynsents than otherwise when they came to town. He could not yet do without Sir John, and he was vexed to think that these women should have any handle—however trifling—against him. He thanked his stars that he had not actually made love to Miss Anna Pynsent; and he hurried back to town next morning by the earliest train, without setting eyes on her again. In town, amidst the bustle of political and social duties, he soon forgot the unpleasant impression that this little episode of his visit to Culverly had left upon his mind.

He went to Maple Cottage on the very day of his return to London, to hear what his mother and sister had to say about his success. And he took an opportunity also of telling Milly Harrington something of the glories which he had achieved, and the privilege which he enjoyed in being able to absent himself from his native country for two or three months at a stretch.

About the end of August, Lettice had to look out for a new maid. Milly went away, saying that she had heard of a better place. She had obtained it without applying to her mistress for a character. She had not been so attentive to her duties of late as to make Lettice greatly regret her departure; but remembering old Mrs. Harrington's fears for her grand-daughter, Lettice made many inquiries of Milly as to her new place. She received, as she thought, very satisfactory replies, although she noticed that the girl changed color strangely, and looked confused and anxious when she was questioned. And when the time came for her to go, Milly wept bitterly, and was heard to express a wish that she had resolved to stay with Miss Lettice after all

CHAPTER XV.

SOME UNEXPECTED MEETINGS.

Two or three months had passed since Alan's wife came back to him.

He had arranged, with the aid of a lawyer, to allow her a certain regular income—with the consequence to himself that he had been obliged to give up his floor in Montagu Place and settle down in the humbler and dingier refuge of Alfred Place. Meanwhile, he had taken steps to collect sufficient evidence for a divorce. He had not yet entered his suit, and he felt pretty certain that when he did so, and Cora was made aware of it in the usual manner, she would find some way of turning round and biting him.

But the desire to be free from his trammels had taken possession of him with irresistible force, and he was prepared to risk the worst that she could do to him in order to accomplish it. Even as it was, he had reason to think that she was not true to her undertaking not to slander or molest him so long as she received her allowance. He had twice received offensive post-cards, and though there was nothing to prove from whom they came, he could have very little doubt that they had been posted by her in moments when jealous rage or intoxication had got the better of her prudence.

The scandal which began to fasten upon his name after Sydney Campion had heard Brooke Dalton's story in the smoking-room of the Oligarchy was almost forgotten again, though it lurked in the memory of many a thoughtless retailer of gossip, ready to revive on the slightest provocation.

More for Lettice's sake than his own, he lived in complete retirement, and scarcely ever left his lodgings except to spend a few hours in the Museum Reading Room. In this way he avoided the chance of meeting her, as well as the chance of encountering his wretched wife, concerning whose mode of life he had only too trustworthy evidence from the lawyer to whom he had committed his interests.

Then there came a day when he could not deny himself the pleasure of attending a conversazione for which tickets had been sent him by an old friend. The subject to be discussed in the course of the evening was one in which he was specially interested, and his main object in going was that he might be made to forget for a few hours the misery of his present existence, which the last of Cora's post-cards had painfully impressed upon him.

He had not been there more than half-an-hour, when, moving with the crowd from one room to another, he suddenly came face to face with Lettice and the Grahams. All of them were taken by surprise, and there was a little constraint in their greeting. Perhaps Lettice was the least disturbed of the four—for the rest of them thought chiefly of her, whilst she thought of Alan's possible embarrassment, which she did her best to overcome, with the ready tact of an unselfish woman.

Alan had grown doubly sensitive of late, and his one idea had been that Lettice must be preserved from all danger of annoyance, whether by the abandoned woman who had so amply proved the shrewdness of her malice, or by himself—who had no less amply proved his weakness. In pure generosity of mind, he would have contented himself with a few grave words, and passed on. But it seemed to her as if he had not the courage to remain, taking for granted her resentment at his unfortunate letter. To her pure mind there was not enough, even in that letter, to cause complete estrangement between them. At any rate, it was not in her to impose the estrangement by any display of anger or unkindness. The sublime courage of innocence was upon her as she spoke.

"See," she said, "the professor is going to begin. The people are taking their seats, and if we do not follow their example all the chairs will be filled, and we shall have to stand for an hour. Let us sit down."

She just glanced at Alan, so that he could regard himself as included in the invitation; and, nothing loth, he sat down beside her. The lecturer did not start for another ten minutes, and Lettice occupied the interval by comparing notes with Clara Graham: for these two dearly loved a gossip in which they could dissect the characters of the men they knew, and the appearance of the women they did not know. It was a perfectly harmless practice as indulged in by them, for their criticism was not malicious. The men, after one or two commonplaces, relapsed into silence, and Alan was able to collect his thoughts, and at the same time to realize how much happiness the world might yet have in store for him, since this one woman, who knew the worst of him, did not think it necessary to keep him at a distance.

Then the professor began to speak. He was a small and feeble man, wheezy in his delivery, and, it must be confessed, rather confused in his ideas. He had been invited to make plain to an audience, presumably well read and instructed, the historical bearings of certain recent discoveries in Egypt; and the task was somewhat difficult for him. There were seven theories, all more or less plausible, which had been started by as many learned Egyptologists; and this worthy old gentleman, though quite as competent to give an opinion, and stick to it, as any of the rest, was so modest and self-depreciatory that he would not go further than to state and advocate each theory in turn, praising its author, and defending him against the other six. After doing this, he was bold to confess that he did not altogether agree with any of the seven. He was on the point of launching his own hypothesis, which would have been incompatible with all the rest, when his heart failed him. He therefore ended by inviting discussion, and sat down, blushing unseen beneath his yellow skin, exactly as he used to blush half a century ago when he was called up to construe a piece of Homer.

Three of the seven Egyptologists were present, and they now rose, one after another, beginning with the oldest. Each of them stated his own theory, showing much deference to the lecturer as "the greatest living authority" on this particular subject; and then, after politely referring to the opinions of the two rival savants whom he saw in the audience, became humorous and sarcastic at the expense of the absent four.

But, as the absent are always wrong in comparison with the present, so youth is always wrong in comparison with age. The youngest Egyptologist—being in truth a somewhat bumptious man, fresh from Oxford by way of Cairo and Alexandria—had presumed to make a little feint of sword-play with one of the lecturer's diffident remarks.

This brought up the other two who had already spoken; and they withered that young man with infinite satisfaction to themselves and the male part of the audience.

The victim, however, was not young and Oxford-bred for nothing. He rose to deprecate their wrath. He was not, he said, contesting the opinion of the lecturer, whose decision on any detail of the matter under consideration he would take as absolutely final. But he pointed out that the opinion he had ventured to examine was expressed by his friend, Dr. A., in a paper read before the Diatribical Society, six weeks before, and it was manifestly at variance with the canon laid down by his friend, Dr. B., as a fundamental test of knowledge and common-sense in the domain of Egyptology.

Thus discord was sown between Dr. A. and Dr. B., and the seed instantly sprang up, and put an end to all that was useful or amicable in that evening's discussion.

Yet everyone agreed that it had been a most interesting conference, and the audience dispersed in high good humor.

It took nearly a quarter of an hour to clear the crowded rooms, and as Alan had offered his arm to Lettice, in order to guide her through the crush, he had an opportunity of speaking to her, which he turned to good account.

"I am glad to see that your brother is in Parliament," he said.

"Yes; of course we were pleased."

"He will make his mark—has made it already, indeed. He is very eloquent; I have heard him speak more than once. He is a most skillful advocate; if I were ever in trouble I would rather have him on my side than against me."

He was speaking lightly, thinking it must please her to hear her brother praised. But she did not answer his last remark.

"I hope Mrs. Campion is well?"

"Not very well, unfortunately. I am afraid she grows much weaker, and her sight is beginning to fail."

"That must be very trying. I know what that means to an old lady who has not many ways of occupying herself. I was making the same observation at home this morning."

"With regard to your mother?"

"Oh, no. My mother died when I was little more than a boy. But I have an aunt living with me, who must be nearly seventy years old, and she was telling me to-day that she could scarcely see to read."

"Oh," said Lettice, with a rush of blood to her face, "is Mrs. Bundlecombe your aunt?"

"Yes," he said, looking rather surprised, "you spoke as if you knew her. Did you ever see Mrs. Bundlecombe?"

"I—I had heard her name."

"At Angleford? Or Thorley?"

"Of course, I heard of Mr. Bundlecombe there."

"Is it not strange," Alan said, after a short pause, "that I never knew you came from Angleford until that morning when I brought you one of your father's books? Then I asked my aunt all about you. I was never at Angleford in my life, and if I had heard the rector's name as a boy I did not recollect it."

"Yes, it is strange. One is too quick at coming to conclusions. I have to beg your pardon, Mr. Walcott, for I really did think that—that Mrs. Bundlecombe was your mother, and that——"

"That I was not going under my own name? That I was the son of a bookseller, and ashamed of it?"

He could not help showing a trace of bitterness in his tone. At any rate, she thought there was bitterness. She looked at him humbly—for Lettice was destitute of the pride which smaller natures use in self-defence when they are proved to be in the wrong—and said,

"Yes, I am afraid I thought so at the moment."

"At what moment?"

"Do not ask me! I am very sorry."

"And glad to find that you were mistaken?"

"I am very glad."

He tried to meet her eyes, but she did not look at him again.

"It was my own fault," he said. "I was going to mention my connection with your father's bookseller that morning; but—you know—my feelings ran away with me. I told you things more to my discredit, did I not?"

"I remember nothing to your discredit. Certainly what you have told me now is not to your discredit."

"If you had met my aunt in London, of course you would have known. But she does not visit or entertain anyone. You knew she was in London?"

"Yes."

"But you never saw her?"

"Yes, once."

"Oh, I did not know that. When?"

"A long time ago. It was quite a casual and unimportant meeting. Oh, Mr. Walcott, who is that terrible woman?"

They were out of the building by this time, standing on the pavement. Graham had called a cab, and whilst they were waiting for it to draw up Lettice had become aware of a strikingly-dressed woman, with painted face and bold eyes, who was planting herself in front of them, and staring at her with a mocking laugh.

Alan was horrified to see that it was his wife who stood before them, with the mad demoniac look in her eyes which he knew too well.

"Alan, my dear Alan," she cried in a shrill voice, causing everyone to look round at the group, "tell her this terrible woman's name! Tell her that I am your wife, the wife that you have plunged into misery and starvation ——"

"For heaven's sake!" said Alan, turning to Graham, "where is your cab? Take them away quickly!"

"Tell her," the virago screamed, "that I am the woman whom you tried to murder, in order that you might be free——"

Here the harangue was cut short by a policeman, who knew the orator very well by sight, and who deftly interposed his arm at the moment when Cora was reaching the climax of her rage. At the same instant the cab drew up, and Lettice was driven away with her friends, not, however, before she had forced Alan to take her hand, and had wished him good-night.

"That must have been his wife," said Clara, whose face was white, and who was trembling violently.

"Yes, confound her!" said her husband, much annoyed by what had happened.

"Could you not stay to see what happens? You might be of some use to Mr. Walcott."

'What good can I do? I wish we had not met him. I have a horror of these scenes; some people, apparently, take them more coolly."

He was out of temper with Lettice, first for sitting by Alan at the conversazione, and then for ostentatiously shaking hands with him on the pavement. Her instinct told her what he was thinking.

"I am sorry it happened," she said; "but when a man is unfortunate one need not take the opportunity of punishing him. It was far worse for him than for us."

"I don't see that," said Graham. "And everyone has to bear his own troubles. Besides, why should a man with such a frightful infliction attach himself to ladies in a public place, and subject them to insult, without so much as warning them what they might expect to meet with?"

"Were you unwarned?"

"I was not thinking of myself. You were not warned."

"I beg your pardon, I was."

"You knew his wife was alive—and—what she is?"

"Yes."

"I must say I cannot understand it."

"You would not have me kind to a man who, as you say, is frightfully afflicted? It was for that very reason I thought we ought to be kind to him to-night."

"My sense of duty does not lead me quite so far; and I do not wish that Clara's should, either!"

"I am sorry," said Lettice, again.

Then there was silence in the cab; but the undutiful Clara was squeezing her friend's hand in the dark, whilst her lord and master fumed for five minutes in his corner. After that, he pulled the check-string.

"What are you going to do?" said Clara.

"Going back again," he said. "You women understand some things better than we do. All the same, I don't know what would happen if you always let your hearts lead you, and if you had no men to look after you. I shall take a hansom and follow on."

He was too late, however, to do any good. The stream of life had swept over the place where Alan and his wife had met, as it sweeps over all the great city's joys and sorrows, glories and disgrace, leaving not a vestige behind.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCEIVED IN SORROW.

Two days later, as Lettice was hard at work in her study on a romance which she had begun in June, at the suggestion of a friendly publisher, she was interrupted by a knock at the door. It was a feeble knock, as of one who was half afraid, and the voice, which she heard inquiring for her immediately afterwards was a feeble voice, which she did not recognize.

Nor did she at first remember the face of Mrs. Bundlecombe, when that lady was brought into her room, so much had she changed since her last visit to Maple Cottage. She looked ten years older than when she transferred to her pocket the twenty pounds which Lettice had paid her, though that was barely twelve months ago.

Lettice was better pleased to see her this time; but there was a sinking at her heart as she thought from whom the old lady had come, and wondered what her coming might mean.

Mrs Bundlecombe produced from her bag a little roll of paper, and laid it on the table with trembling hands.

"There, Miss Campion," she said, taking the chair which Lettice had put for her, "now I feel better already, and I can answer your kind inquiries. I cannot say that I am very well, but there is nothing you can do for me, except take the money back that I came and asked you for a year ago. Don't say anything against it, my dear, for my Alan says it must be done, and there is no use in trying to turn him. It is the right method for peace of conscience, as the good Mr. Baxter said, and that must be my apology, though I am sure you will not think it was nothing but sinful self-seeking that made me come to you before."

"I don't understand, Mrs. Bundlecombe! I simply paid you a debt, did I not? If it was right for my father to pay (as he would have done if he had lived), it was right for me to pay; and as it was right for me to pay, it was right for you to ask. And it gave me pleasure, as I told you at the time, so that I object to taking the money back again."

"That is what I said to Alan, but he would not listen to me. 'Miss Campion was not bound to pay her father's debt,' he said, 'any more than Mr. Campion, and therefore it was wrong for you to ask either of them. But to go to a woman,' he said, 'was more than wrong, it was mean; and I can never look in her face again if you do not take it back and beg her pardon.' He can be very stern, my dear, when he is not pleased, and just now I could not disobey him if he was to tell me to go on my knees through London town."

"How did he know that I had paid you?"

"Well, it was yesterday; we had been in great trouble"—and here Mrs. Bundlecombe broke down, having been very near doing it from the moment when she entered the room. Lettice comforted her as well as she could, and made her drink a glass of wine; and so she gradually recovered her voice.

"Well, as I was saying, my dear, in the evening, when we were quiet by ourselves, he said to me, 'Aunt Bessy, I met Miss Campion last night, and I gather from what she told me that you had seen one another in London. You never mentioned that to me. When was it?' I did not want to make a clean breast of it, but he has such a way of cross-questioning one that I could not keep it back; and that is how it all came out. So you must put up with it, for my sake. I dare not touch the money again, was it ever so."

"Then I must speak to Mr. Walcott about it myself, the next time I see him, for I think he has not been just to you."

"Oh yes, my dear, he has! He is always so just, poor boy!" There was an ominous quaver here. "And it is not as if we wanted money. I had three or four hundred from selling the business, and Alan has nearly that every year—but now he gives two pounds a week——"

Then there was another collapse, and Lettice thought it best to let the old woman have her cry out. Only she went over and sat by her side, and took one of the thin hands between her own, and cried just a little to keep her company.

"Oh, my dear," said Mrs. Bundlecombe at last, "it is such a comfort to have a woman to talk to. I have not had a good talk to one of my own sex since I came up to London, unless it is the landlady in Montagu Place, and she is a poor old antiquity like myself, with none of your soft and gentle ways. It would do me good to tell you all we have gone through since that bad creature found us out, but I have no right to make you miserable with other people's sorrows. No—I will go away before I begin to be foolish again; and my boy will be waiting for me."

"If you think Mr. Walcott would not object to your telling me, and if it will be any relief to you, do! Indeed, I think I would rather hear it."

So Mrs. Bundlecombe poured out her tale to sympathetic ears, and gave Lettice an account of Alan's married life so far as she knew it, and of the return of the runaway, and of the compact which Alan had made with her, and of the postcards, and the slandering and the threats.

"And the night before last he came home in a terrible rage—that would be after seeing you, my dearie—and he walked about the room for ever so long before he would tell me a word. And then he said,

"'I have seen her again, Aunt Bessy, and she has molested me horribly out in the street, when I was with——'

"And there he stopped short, and fell on the sofa, and cried—yes, dear, he cried like a woman, as if his heart would break; and I guessed why it was, though he did not mention your name. For you know," said Mrs. Bundlecombe, looking at Lettice with mournful eyes, "or leastways you don't know, how he worships the ground——"

"Don't," said Lettice, "don't tell me more than he would like. I—I cannot bear to hear it all!"

"Maybe I have said too much; but you must forgive me if I have. And so, when he was a bit better he said that he should go next morning and tell the lawyer that she had broken her compact, and he would not pay her any more money, but give her notice of the divorce.

"'All the heart and all the mercy is crushed out of me,' he said; 'she has turned her venom on *her*, and she shall suffer for it.'

"So in the morning he went to his lawyer. And it was the day when she used to call for her money, and she must have called for it and been refused, for early in the afternoon she came round to our lodgings, and went on like a mad woman in the street, shrieking and howling, and saying the most horrible things you can imagine. I could not tell you half she said, about—about us all. Oh dear, oh dear! I had heard what one of those Frenchwomen could be, but I never saw anything like it before, and I hope I never may again!"

"Was he there?"

"Yes, he was there. And he said to me, 'If I give her in charge, it will have to go into the police court, and anything is better than that!' But then she mentioned—she began to say other things, and he said, 'My God, if this is not stopped, I shall do her an injury!' So I went out, and fetched a policeman, and that put an end to it for the time.

"You can fancy that my poor Alan is nearly out of his mind, not knowing what she may be up to next. One thing he is afraid of more than anything: and to be sure I don't think he cares for anything else. Ever since I let out your name on that first night he has been dreading what might happen to you through her spite and malice!"

Lettice was deeply moved by Mrs. Bundlecombe's story, and as the old woman finished she kissed her on the cheek.

"Tell him," she said, "that I have heard what he has suffered—that I asked you, and you told me. Tell him not to think of me because I am forewarned, and am not afraid of anything she can do. And tell him that he should not think of punishing her, for the punishment she has brought upon herself is enough."

"I will repeat it word for word, my dearie, and it will comfort him to have a message from you. But I doubt he will not spare her now, for she is more than flesh and blood can bear."

Then Lettice took her visitor to her mother's room, and made tea for her, and left the two to compare notes with each other for half an hour. Thus Mrs. Bundlecombe went away comforted, and took some comfort back with her to the dingy room in Alfred Place.

It was hard for Lettice to turn to her work again, as though nothing had happened since she last laid down her pen. The story to which she had listened, and the picture which it brought so vividly before her mind of the lonely, persecuted man who pined for her love when she had no right to give it, nor he to ask for it, compelled her to realize what she had hitherto fought away and kept in the background. She could no longer cheat herself with the assurance that her heart was in her own keeping, and that her feeling for Alan was one of mere womanly pity.

She loved him; and she would not go on lying to her own heart by saying that she did not.

Her character was not by any means perfect; but, as with all of us, a mixture of good and ill—the evil and the good often springing out of the same inborn qualities of her nature. She had a keen sense of enjoyment in hearing and seeing new things, in broaching new ideas and entering upon fresh fields of thought; and her appetite in these respects was all the stronger for the gloom and seclusion in which the earlier years of her womanhood had been spent. She was lavish in generosity to her friends, and did not count the cost when she wanted to be kind. But as the desire for enjoyment may be carried to the length of self-indulgence, so there is often a selfishness in giving and a recklessness in being over kind. Lettice, moreover, was extravagant in the further sense that she did not look much beyond the present month or present year of existence. She thought her sun would always shine.

Her blemishes were quite compatible with her virtues, with the general right-mindedness and brave performance of duty which had hitherto marked her life. She was neither bad nor perhaps very good, but just such a woman as Nature selects to be the instrument of her most mysterious workings.

If Lettice admitted to herself the defeat which she had sustained in one quarter, she was all the less disposed to accept a check elsewhere. Her will to resist a hopeless love was broken down, but that only increased the strength of her determination to conceal the weakness from every eye, to continue the struggle of life as though there were no flaw in her armor, and to work indefatigably for the independence of thought and feeling and action which she valued above all other possessions,

So she chained herself to her desk, and finished her romance, which in its later chapters gained intensity of pathos and dramatic insight from the constant immolation of her own heart as she imagined the martyrdoms and sacrifices of others.

The story which was to make her famous had been conceived in sorrow, and it became associated with the greatest sufferings of her life. She had scarcely sent it off to the publisher, in the month of October, when her mother, who had been gradually failing both in body and in mind, quietly passed away in her sleep. No death could have been easier. The heart had done its work, and ceased to beat; but though Lettice was spared the grief which she would have felt if her mother had lingered long on a painful death-bed, the shock was still very severe. For a time she was entirely prostrated by it. The manifold strain upon her mind had tried her too much, and for several weeks after the funeral Clara Graham was nursing her through a dangerous illness.

CHAPTER XVII.

"TO THY CHAMBER WINDOW, SWEET!"

THE message which had been sent by Lettice to Alan, by the mouth of Mrs. Bundlecombe, had not lost much in its transit.

"Tell him," she had said, "that I have heard what he has suffered. Tell him not to trouble for me because I am forewarned, and am not afraid of anything she can do. And tell him that he should not think of punishing her, for the punishment she has brought on herself is enough."

It had consoled him greatly to have this assurance of her sympathy. He did not presume too far on the mere fact of her having sent him a message, and the words themselves did not amount to very much. But if she had cared nothing at all, she would have said nothing at all; and perhaps the description which his aunt gave him of Lettice's kindness to her, and of her interest in the story which she had heard, did more to appease his heart than anything else.

It was his full intention to do all that was possible to deliver himself from the bondage of his unhappy marriage, and in the meantime he would take every precaution to prevent Lettice from being annoyed by this termagant of a woman. But he rejoiced to think that Lettice herself was in some manner prepared for what might happen to her, and was on her guard against the danger.

There was a certain sweetness in the thought that they shared this danger between them, that his enemy was hers also, and that she had voluntarily ranged herself by his side. A feeling of satisfaction flashed through his mind at this community of interests with the woman whom he loved, but it was merged at once in the conviction that he could not be content for one single moment to leave her exposed to the possibility of insult from Cora.

She had commanded him not to punish his wife. It was very difficult for him to obey. This bitterness against the degraded wretch was roused to its highest pitch by her last outbreak. If she would only die out of his life—die in any sense, so that he might hear and see her no more—he would not ask for her punishment. If she would cease to be his wife, and enable him to stand beside the pure and steadfast woman whose gentle influence had transformed his soul, he would forgive her. There was no way in which this could be done except by exposing her before the world, and depriving her of all right to look to him for support, and in the doing of this he knew full well there would be no room for weak pity and misgiving.

He could not forgive her if that was to mean that he should keep her as his wife, and go on trying to buy her silence. He did not want to inflict pain upon her out of mere resentment, and if he could have his way in the matter of the divorce he was quite willing that she should have some of his money. He would be so rich without her that he would gladly go out into the street then and there, stripped of everything that he possessed, if in that way he could shake off the galling fetters that weighed upon him.

To-morrow he would tell his lawyer that she was to have her weekly money again, on condition of her solemnly renewing her engagement not to molest him in any way, and not to interfere with any of his friends. She would probably regard the offer as a sign of weakness, but at any rate it would put her on her good behavior for a time. He would do this for Lettice's sake, if not for his own.

He knew with whom he had to deal, and of what this raving woman was capable. If she had been English, or German, and had gone utterly to the bad, she might by this time have been lethargically besotted, and would have given him very little trouble so long as she received her two pounds a week. But Cora was Latin, and belonged to the same race as the poet who drew the harpies, and the Gorgons, and mad Dido, and frenzied Camilla, who had painted in a hundred forms the unrestrained fury of his countrywomen, when the grace and tenderness of their sex had deserted them. She also was besotted at times, but whenever she was not besotted her mind was full of vivacity, and her anger was as a whirlwind, and neither fear nor prudence could hold her in check. Alan knew her only too well, even before she had tried to kill him in France, and he had no doubt that the outbreak of the last few days was only the beginning of a persecution which she would maintain so long as she had the power to injure him.

For himself he had already resolved what to do. Even his aunt must not be subject to these annoyances, and he bade her pack up her things and go to an old friend of hers in the country. He would leave his present lodging and get housed somewhere out of her reach. Why should he remain at her mercy, when it did not matter to any one where he lived, and when certainly no householder would endure a lodger who was liable to be visited by a madwoman?

But Lettice? How could she be defended from attack? It was clear that Cora was jealous of her, or at all events maliciously set against her. It had required very little to produce that effect. Heaven knew that Lettice had done nothing to excite jealousy even in the mind of a blameless wife, entitled to the most punctilious respect and consideration of her husband. If only Lettice could be placed in safety, carried away from London to some happy haven where no enemy could follow and torment her, and where he might guard her goings and comings, he would be content to play the part of a watch-dog, if by that means he could be near her and serve her!

Something impelled him to get up and leave the house. It was dark by this time, and he wandered aimlessly through the streets; but by and by, without any conscious intention, he found himself walking rapidly in the direction of Hammersmith.

Eight o'clock had struck when he left his lodgings in Alfred Place, and it was after nine when he stood at the corner where the main-road passes by the entrance to Brook Green. He had never once looked behind him; and, even if he had, he would scarcely have detected in the darkness the figure which dogged his steps with obstinate persistence.

He hesitated for a minute or more at the corner, and then walked slowly round the Green. Opposite to Maple Cottage there was a large tree, and underneath it, barely visible from the pavement, a low wooden seat. Here he sat down, and watched the dimly-lighted windows.

Why had he come there? What was in his mind when he turned his face to Lettice's cottage, and sat patiently looking out of the darkness? He could not have answered the questions if they had been put to him. But he felt a sense of comfort in knowing that she was so near, and pleased himself with the thought that even for these few minutes he was guarding her from unseen dangers.

He may have been sitting there for half-an-hour—a hundred images chasing each other through his disordered brain—when suddenly a blind in the cottage was drawn up. For a moment he saw the form of Lettice as she stood at the window, with a lamp in her hand, framed like a picture by the ivy which covered the wall. Then the shutters closed, and he was left alone in the darkness.

Alone, as he thought: but he was not alone.

He had started to his feet when her face appeared at the window, and stood with his arms extended, as though he would reach through space to touch her. Then, as she disappeared, he softly murmured her name.

"Lettice! My Lettice!"

A harsh laugh grated on his ears. It came from the other side of the tree, and Alan sprang in the direction of the sound. He need not have hastened, for his wife had no desire to conceal her presence. She was coming forward to meet him; and there, in the middle of the Green, shrouded in almost complete darkness, the two stood face to face.

"Tiens, mon ami; te voilà!"

She was in her mocking mood—certain to be quiet for a few minutes, as Alan told himself the moment he recognized her. What was she doing here? He had thought that she did not know where Lettice lived; how had she discovered the place? It did not occur to him that his own folly had betrayed the secret; on the contrary, he blessed the instinct which had brought him to the spot just when he was wanted. "A spirit in my feet hath led me to thy chamber window, sweet!" All this passed through his mind in a couple of seconds.

"Yes, I am here. And you! How came you here?"

"Nothing more simple. I came on my feet. But you walked quick, my dear; I could hardly keep up with you at times."

"You followed me!"

"Yes, I followed you—all the way from Alfred Place. I wanted so much to know where she lived, and I said, 'He shall show me. He, who would not for worlds that I should know—he will be my sign-post.' Pouf! you men are stupid creatures. I must be cunning with you, my good husband who would leave me to starve—who would divorce me, and marry this woman, and cut the hated Cora out of your life. But no, my poor child, it shall not be. So long as we live, we two, Cora will never desert you. It is my only consolation, that I shall be able to follow every step of your existence as I followed you to-night, without your knowing where I am, or at what moment I may stand before you."

"Let us walk," said Alan, "and talk things over. Why stand here?"

"You are afraid that I shall make another scandal, and rouse the virtuous Lettice from her pillow, with the sound of her name screamed out in the night? Ha, ha! How the poor coward trembles! Have no fear! Twice in a week your brutal police have seized me, and I do not love their kind attentions. Now and then I may defy them, when I need an excitement of that kind; but not to-night. To-night I mean to be clever, and show you how I can twist a cold-blooded Englishman round my finger. If you go, then I will scream—it is a woman's bludgeon, my child, as her tongue is her dagger. Bah! be quiet and listen to me. You shall not divorce me, for if you try I will accuse you of all sorts of things—basenesses that will blast your name for ever."

"I am not afraid of you," said Alan. "For anything I know, you have a pistol under your cloak—shoot me. I took you to love and cherish, and you have made my life a hell. What good is it? Shoot!"

"No; that makes a noise. In Paris I would shoot you, for it is you who have destroyed my life. But in London you do not understand these things, so that I must act differently. Listen! If you try to divorce me, and do not pay me my money, I have one or two little pistol-shots à l'anglaise which will suit you perfectly. Shall I tell you what I would say, to anyone who would listen to me—in court, in the street, anywhere?"

"As you please."

"First, that you fired at me at Culoz, and that I can bring forward witnesses of the attempted assassination."

"That is pure nonsense; I am not to be frightened by such child's play."

"Second, so far as the divorce is concerned, that whatever my offence may have been, you have condoned it. Do you not understand, my friend? Did I not find shelter in your rooms in Montagu Place? I would have a good lawyer, who would know how to make the most of that."

"Have you nothing stronger to rely on?"

"Listen; you shall tell me. My third pistol-shot is this—that you were wont to make private assignations with Miss Lettice Campion, and that you had been seen dropping from her window, here in Brook Green, at midnight. What do you think of that, for example?"

"Vile wretch!" said Alan. "Your malice has robbed you of your senses. Who would believe you?"

"Do not be a child. Are you English, and do you ask who would believe a woman telling these tales of a man? Do you not know that men are ruined every day in England by the lies of women? The better the man, the more abandoned the woman, the more incredible her lies, so much the more certain is his condemnation. Bah, you know it! I should not hesitate about the lies, and, if I made them sufficiently repulsive, your noble countrymen would not hesitate to believe them. Do you doubt it? What think you of my plan?"

He made no answer; he was trying to command himself.

"Now, tell me! Shall I have my money as usual?"

"Before I left the house," he said, "I had resolved that the money ought to be paid to you. So long as you are my wife, you ought not to starve."

"Good! It is an annuity for life!"

"No. I would give a hand or an eye to be free from you."

"They would be useless to me, my dear. Would you give the fair fame of Lettice? It will cost no less."

"Let that pass!"

"Yes, we will let that pass. Then, I receive my money as usual?"

"Go to Mr. Larmer to-morrow; he will pay it."

"I hate this Mr. Larmer—he is an animal without manners. But no matter. I am glad you are reasonable, my friend. You buy a respite for a few weeks. I shall forget you with all my heart—until I have a migraine, and suddenly remember you again. But it is too cheap; I cannot live decently on this paltry sum. Good-bye, my child—and gare aux migraines!"

She was gone, and Alan was left alone. He had dug his nails into the palms of his hands, in the effort to restrain himself, until the blood came; and long after the mocking fiend had departed he sat silent on the bench, half-stupefied with rage and despair.

Was he really the coward that he felt himself, to listen to her shameless threats, and tremble at the thought of her machinations? Lettice had told him that she was not afraid; but ought he not to be afraid for her, and do all that was possible to avert a danger from her which he would not fear on his own account?

Ah, if he could only take counsel with her, how wise and brave she would be; how he would be encouraged by her advice and strengthened by her sympathy! But he knew that it was impossible to call to his aid the woman whom it was his first duty to protect from annoyance. She should never know the torture he was enduring until it had came to an end, and he could tell it with his own lips as an indifferent story of the past.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SLEEPY NOOK.

THREE miles from Angleford, on the other side of the river, and hidden away by trees on every side, sleeps the lazy little village of Birchmead. So lazy is the place—so undisturbed have been its slumbers, from generation to generation, that it might puzzle the most curious to think why a village should be built there at all. There is no ford through the river, and, though a leaky ferryboat makes occasional journeys from one side to the other, the path which leads to the bank is too precipitous for any horse to tread. The only route by which a cart can enter Birchmead branches off from the Dorminster Road, across a quarter of a mile of meadows; and when the gate of the first meadow is closed, the village is completely shut in on every side. The world scarcely knows it, and it does not know the world—its life is "but a sleep and a forgetting."

The place has a history of its own, which can be told in a couple of sentences. Two hundred years ago, an eccentric member of the family to which the country-side belonged had chosen to set up here a little community on his own account, shaped on a model which, universally applied, would doubtless regenerate the world. He built, out of stone, a farmhouse and barns, and a score of cottages for his working-men, and there he spent his life and his money, nursing for some thirty years his dream of hard work and perfect satisfaction. Then he died, and a farmer without his faith and wealth succeeded him, and the hamlet lost its originality, and became as much like other hamlets as its love of sleep and pride of birth would allow.

One thing saves it from desertion and extinction. It has a reputation, over half a county, for being one of the most healthy and life-prolonging spots in England. It certainly contains a remarkable number of old men and women, some of whom have come from the neighboring towns to end their lives in the weather-proof stone cottages and fertile allotments which remain at this day precisely as they were built and measured out by the philanthropic squire in the seventeenth century. Other cottages have been run up in the meantime, and a few villas of a more pretentious character; but there is always a brisk competition for the substantial domiciles, as snug and sound as any almshouse, which encircle the village green of Birchmead.

In one of these cottages Mrs. Bundlecombe found a refuge when Alan sent her away from London. It was in the occupation of an old friend with whom she had been on intimate terms at Thorley—a widow like herself, blessed by Heaven with a perennial love of flowers and vegetables, and recognized by all her neighbors as the best gardener and neatest housewife in the community. With Mrs. Chigwin, Alan's aunt was happier than she had ever hoped to be again, and the only drawback to her felicity was the thought of her nephew's troubles and solitude.

The next cottage to Mrs. Chigwin's was inhabited by old Mrs. Harrington, the grandmother of Lettice's first maid. There had been no love lost between Mrs. Bundlecombe and Mrs. Harrington, when they once lived in the same town. The grudge had arisen out of a very small matter. The bookseller's wife had sold a Bible to Mrs. Harrington, in the absence of her husband, for twopence more than Mr. Bundlecombe had demanded for the same book, from some common acquaintance of both parties to the bargain, on the previous day; and this common acquaintance having seen the book and depreciated it a few weeks later, the purchaser had an abiding sense of having been outrageously duped and cheated. She had come to the shop and expressed herself to this effect, in no moderate terms; and Mrs. Bundlecombe, whilst returning the twopence, had made some disparaging remarks on the other lady's manners, meanness, dress, age, and general inferiority. The affront had never been quite forgotten on either side, and it was not without much ruffling of their mental plumage that the two old bodies found themselves established within a few yards of each other.

The squire's cottages at Birchmead were detached, but their ample gardens had only a low wall between them, so that the neighboring occupiers could not well avoid an occasional display of their mutual disposition, whether good or bad. It was close upon winter when Mrs. Bundlecombe arrived in the village, and very wet weather, so that there was no immediate clashing of souls across the garden wall; but in November there came a series of fine warm days, when no one who had a garden could find any excuse for staying indoors. Accordingly, one morning Mrs. Chigwin, who knew what was amiss between her friends, seeing Mrs. Harrington pacing the walk on the other side of the wall, determined to bring about a meeting, and, if possible, a reconciliation.

"Elizabeth, my dear, that gravel looks perfectly dry. You must come out in the sun, and see the last of my poor flowers."

"Martha Chigwin," said her visitor, with a solemn face; "do you see that woman?"

"Yes, I see her. What then?"

"I do not nurse wrath, my love, but I cannot abide her."

"Are not six years long enough to remember a little thing of that sort? Come along, Elizabeth; you will find that she has grown quite civil and pleasant-spoken since you used to know her."

So they went out into the garden, and the two ancient foes sniffed and bridled at each other as they approached through the transparent screen of tall yellow chrysanthemums which lined Mrs. Chigwin's side of the wall.

"Mrs. Harrington," said the peacemaker, "there is no need for me to introduce you to my old friend, Elizabeth Bundlecombe, who has come to pay me a nice long visit. We shall be her neighbors and close friends, I hope, and if you will do me the favor to come in this afternoon and drink a cup of tea with us, we shall be very glad to see you."

"Thank you kindly, Mrs. Chigwin. Good-morning to you, Mrs. Bundlecombe. I hear you have been living in London, ma'am, quite grand, as the saying is!"

"No, Mrs. Harrington, not grand at all, ma'am. Don't say so. I have known what trouble is since my poor dear husband died, and I shall never feel like being grand again."

"Never again, ma'am? Well, I am sure that Mrs. Bundlecombe knows how to bear her fortune, whether good or bad. Did you say never again, ma'am?"

The old lady seemed to take this phrase as a kind of comprehensive and dignified apology for the past, which ought to be met in a conciliatory manner.

"Well, well, Mrs. Bundlecombe, bygones is bygones, and there's no more to be said about it. Not but what principle is principle, be it twopence or twenty pounds."

"Allowance must be made, Mrs. Harrington, for the feelings of the moment."

"On both sides, ma'am," said Mrs. Harrington.

"Like reasonable parties," said Mrs. Bundlecombe.

Then they nodded at each other with much vigor, and shook hands across the top of the wall through the branches of the chrysanthemums. Thus vaguely, but with a clear understanding on the part of both combatants, peace was made, and good relations were established. Mrs. Chigwin was delighted at the easy way in which the difficulty had been overcome, and in the afternoon she treated her friends in such a genuinely hospitable and considerate fashion that they were soon perfectly at their ease. Indeed, the three old people became very intimate, and spent their Christmas together in peace and charity.

Alan came over one day early in February to see his aunt, and make sure that she was as comfortable as she professed to be. It was a characteristic proceeding on his part. Mrs. Bundlecombe, as the reader may have observed, was not very poetic in her taste, and not so refined in manners as most of the women with whom Alan now associated. But he always thought of her as the sister of his mother, to whom he had been romantically attached; and he had good reason, moreover, to appreciate her devotion to himself during the last year or so. He found her fairly happy, and said nothing which might disturb her peace of mind. Lettice Campion, he told her, had recovered from a serious illness, and had gone on the Continent for a few weeks with Mrs. Hartley. He was bent on obtaining a divorce, and expected the case to come on shortly. This he treated as a matter for unmixed rejoicing; and he casually declared that he had not seen "the Frenchwoman" for eight or ten weeks; which was true enough, but only because he was carefully keeping out of her way. And it was a poor equivocation, as the reader will presently see.

So Mrs. Bundlecome flattered herself that things were going fairly well with her nephew, and she possessed her soul in patience.

Now as Alan sat talking to his aunt in Mrs. Chigwin's best room, looking out upon the garden on Mrs. Harrington's side, he suddenly started, and stopped short in what he was saying.

"Why, Aunt Bessy, who on earth is living next door to you?"

Mrs. Bundlecombe looked where he pointed, and was almost as much surprised as himself to see Lettice's former maid, Milly, walking in the garden with all the airs and graces of a grand lady. She had on a fur cloak, and a little cap to match, and she looked so handsome and well-dressed that it would not have been surprising if Alan had not recognized her. But Milly's pretty face, once seen, was not easily forgotten; and, as she was associated with Lettice in Alan's mind, he had all the more reason for recalling her features.

"That is the first I have seen of her in these parts,'" said Mrs. Bundlecombe. "You remember that Miss Campion had a Thorley girl at Maple Cottage, who left her five or six months ago?"

"I remember your telling me so—Milly, she used to be called?"

"Yes, Emily Harrington. That is the girl, without a doubt. Her grandmother lives over yonder; but I never knew that she was expecting a visit from this fine lady. Only last week she was telling me that she had not heard from Milly for several months. There was a letter from her before Christmas, to say that she was married and traveling abroad."

Mrs. Bundlecombe shook her head dubiously from side to side, and continued the motion for some time. She was thinking how much money it would have taken to buy that sealskin cloak; but, however far her doubts may have carried her, she did not give utterance to them in words.

"She is certainly very nice-looking," said Alan. "And she seems to be getting on in the world. Perhaps she has made a good marriage; I should not at all wonder."

"Well, it is charitable to hope so," said Aunt Bessy, with an expression in her face that was anything but hopeful. "I can't forgive her for leaving Miss Campion in such a hurry. I suppose she wanted to better herself, as those minxes always say. As if anyone could be better off than living with *her !*"

Alan turned round to the window again, and looked out. His aunt's words touched a chord in his heart, which vibrated strongly. To live with her, in any capacity whatever—assuredly that would be the highest attainable good. To draw from her gentle presence that bliss of absolute rest and ease which he had never known until he came to know her—to talk and listen without a shadow of reserve, forgetting self, unashamed of any inferiority which his mind might show in comparison with hers, unafraid of giving offense to that sweet and well-poised nature—to look upon her face, almost infantile in its ingenuous expression, yet with indomitable strength in the clear grey eyes which revealed the soul within—to live with her would indeed be perfect happiness!

And the more he felt this, the less hopeful he was of realizing his aspiration. She had been ill, at the point of death, and he could not be near her. He had inquired of her progress at the Grahams' house, but always in fear lest he should bring sorrow to her, or annoyance to them. The creature whom he had made his wife was never absent from his thoughts. In his most despondent moments he ceased to believe that he would ever be able to shake her off. She haunted him, asleep or awake, at his meals and at his books, in his quiet lodging or when he stole out for a solitary walk. He tried to persuade himself that he exaggerated his trouble, and that there were plenty of men under similar circumstances who would not allow their peace of mind to be disturbed. But if he was weaker than others, that did not make his pain less bitter. He feared her, and dreaded the fulfilment of her threats; yet not so much on his own account as because they were directed against Lettice.

It was no consolation to him to think that the law would punish her—that the police would remove her as a drunken brawler—that the courts could give him his divorce, or perhaps shut her up as a madwoman. What good would even a divorce be to him if she had slandered Lettice, blackened his character, alienated all whom he loved, and remained alive to be the curse and poison of his existence?

As he pondered these things in his heart, the trouble which he had fought off when he came down into the country that morning returned upon him with renewed force. He had fled from town to escape from the agony of shame and disgust which she had once more inflicted on him, and he groaned aloud as he thought of what had happened in the last few days.

"I think I must have a touch of the gout," he said, turning round to where his aunt was sitting, with a pleasant smile on his face. "It catches me sometimes with such a sudden twinge that I cannot help crying out like that."

Aunt Bessy looked hard at him, and shook her head; but she said nothing.

Soon after that, Alan went away; and he had not been gone half-an-hour, when there came a gentle rap at the cottage door.

Mrs. Bundlecombe opened it at once, and found, as she had expected, that the visitor was none other than our old friend Milly. Aunt Bessy had had a few minutes to prepare herself for this scene, and was therefore able to comport herself, as she imagined, with proper dignity. Affecting not to see the pretty hand which was held out to her, she started back, looked inquisitively into the other's face, and then cried out, as she turned her head round upon her shoulders, "Well, Martha! Martha Chigwin! Here is an old acquaintance come to see us. Emily Harrington, love, Mrs. Harrington's grand-daughter, who went to live with Miss Campion in London. Well, you did surprise me!" she said in a more quiet voice. "Come in and sit down, Emily Harrington!"

"Granny told me you were here," said Milly, a little taken aback by this reception, "so I thought I must come in and see how you were."

"We are very well, thank you kindly, Milly. And how are you? But there is no need to ask you, for you look a picture of health, and spirits, and—and good luck, Milly Harrington!"

"Oh yes, I am very well. You don't know that I have been married since you saw me last. My name is Mrs. Beadon now."

She drew off her glove as she spoke, and let her long hand fall upon her lap, so that the old ladies might see her wedding-ring and keeper.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Bundlecombe, in a mollified voice, "if you are married to a good man, I am very glad, indeed. And I hope he is well to-do, and makes you happy. You are nicely dressed, Milly, but nice clothes are not everything, are they?"

"No, indeed, they are not. Oh, yes, Mr. Beadon is good to me in every way, so you need not trouble yourself on my account."

After that preliminary sparring, they became friendly enough. Milly was quite at her ease when her position as a wife was established, and she amused her hearers by a lively account of her recent fortunes and adventures—some of them, perhaps, slightly fictitious in character, others exaggerated and glorified. Her husband, she told them, was a great traveler, and was sometimes out of England for six months or a year at a time. He had just gone abroad again, and she had taken the opportunity of coming to see her grandmother—and even of living with her for awhile, if she found Birchmead supportable. They were not rich, but Mr. Beadon allowed her quite enough to live comfortably upon.

So she played the grand lady in the hamlet, to her own infinite satisfaction. But now and again she had business to transact in London, and then she would send to Thorley for a cab, and take the afternoon train to Liverpool Street, and return in about twenty-four hours, generally with some little present in her bag for her grandmother, or grandmother's friends.

None the less did poor Milly find that time hung heavy on her hands. She had not yet clipped the wings of her ambition, and she still pined for a wider sphere in which to satisfy her vague and restless longings. However she might brave it out to others, she was very far from being happy; and now and then she took herself to task, and admitted that all she had, and all she hoped for, would be but a small price to give if she could purchase once more the freedom of her girlhood.

CHAPTER XIX.

SIR JOHN'S GLOXINIAS.

WHATEVER may have been the intention of Nature when she produced Sir John Pynsent, there was no doubt as to his own conception of the part which he was fitted to play in the world.

He considered himself, and indeed he was, above all things, a manipulator of men. His talents in this direction had been displayed at school and at college, and when he settled down to political life in London, and impulsively began to suggest, to persuade, to contrive, and to organize, everyone with whom he came in contact acknowledged a superior mind, or, at any rate, a more ingenious and fertile mind. He had refused to bind himself down to an office, as his friends wanted him to do, or to take part in the direction of a "Central Association" for dealing with men in the lump. It was absurd to think of tying Sir John to a place, or a routine, or a pledge of any kind. His art was to be ubiquitous; he aspired to be the great permeator of the Conservative party; and by sheer force of activity he soon became the best known and most popular of the younger generation of Tories.

His triumphs as a manager of men were not confined to public life. He was one of a numerous family, and he managed them all. Every Pynsent deferred to Sir John's opinion, not merely because he was the head of the house, but because he had assumed the command, and justified the assumption by his shrewdness and common-sense.

The one person in the family who gave most anxiety was his half-sister, Anna. Sir John's father had married a second time, when his son was a youth at Eton, and Anna, the fruit of this union, inherited, not only her mother's jointure of twenty thousand pounds, but a considerable fortune from her mother's elder brother, who had been a manufacturer in Vanebury. This fortune had been allowed to accumulate for the last eighteen years, as her father, and after him, her brother, had provided her with a home, and disdained to touch "Nan's money." Sir John was a very good brother to her, and it was even rumored that he had married early chiefly for the purpose of providing Nan with an efficient chaperon. Whether this was true or not, he had certainly married a woman who suited him admirably; Lady Pynsent sympathized in all his tastes and ambitions, gave excellent dinner parties, and periodically brought a handsome boy into the world to inherit the family name and embarrass the family resources. At present there were five of these boys, but as the family resources were exceedingly large, and Sir John was a most affectionate parent, the advent of each had been hailed with increasing satisfaction.

It was a great relief to Sir John's mind to find that his wife and his sister were such good friends. He might be a manipulator of man, but he was not—he acknowledged to himself—always successful in his manipulation of women. If Selina had found Nan in the way, or if Nan had been jealous of Selina and Selina's babies, Sir John felt that he would have been placed on the horns of a dilemma. But this had not been the case. Nan was in the schoolroom when Lady Pynsent first arrived at Culverley, and the child had been treated with kindness and discretion Nan repaid the kindness by an extravagant fondness for her little nephews, who treated her abominably, and the discretion by an absolute surrender of her will to Lady Pynsent's as far as her intercourse with the outer world was concerned. With her inner life, she considered that Lady Pynsent had not much to do, and it was in its manifestation that Sir John observed the signs which made him anxious.

Nan, he said to himself, was a handsome girl, and one whom many men were sure to admire. Also, she had sixty thousand pounds of her own, of which she would be absolute mistress when she was twenty-one. It was a sum which was sure to attract fortune-hunters; and how could he tell whether Nan would not accept her first offer, and then stick to an unsuitable engagement with all the obstinacy which she was capable of displaying? Nan sometimes made odd friends, and would not give them up at anybody's bidding. How about the man she married? She would have her own way in that matter—Sir John was sure of it—and, after refusing all the eligible young men within reach, would (he told his wife repeatedly) end by taking up with a crooked stick at last.

"I don't think she'll do that," said Lady Pynsent when her husband appealed in this way to her. "Nan is very *difficile.* She is more likely to remain unmarried than marry an unsuitable man."

"Unmarried!" Sir John threw up his hands. "She *must* marry! Why, if she doesn't marry, she is just the girl to take up a thousand fads—to make herself the laughing-stock of the county!"

"She will not do that; she has too much good taste."

"Good taste won't avail her! You know what her plans are already, to live in Vanebury as soon as she is twenty-one, and devote herself to the welfare of the working-people! Don't you call that a fad? Won't she make a laughing stock of herself and of us too? Why, it's worse than Radicalism—its's pure Socialism and Quixotry," said poor Sir John, who was proud of his Toryism.

His wife only shook her head, and said, drily, that she would not undertake to prophesy.

"Prophesy? My dear Selina, I merely want you to exert common caution and foresight. There is but one thing to do with Anna. We must get her married as soon as ever we can, before she is twenty-one, if possible. She must marry a man on our own side, some years older than herself—a man of the world, who will look after her property and teach her common-sense—a man who can restrain her, and guide her, and make her happy. I would give a thousand pounds to find such a man."

But in his own heart the baronet believed that he had found him, for he thought of his friend, Sydney Campion.

Campion had small private means, if any; he knew that; but then he seemed likely to be one of the foremost men of the day, and if he could achieve his present position at his age, what would he not be in ten years' time? Quite a match for Anna Pynsent, in spite of her beauty and her sixty thousand pounds. If Nan had been a little more commonplace, Sir John would have aspired higher for her. But there was a strain of "quixotry," as he called it, in her nature, which made him always uncertain as to her next action. And he felt that it would be a relief to him to have her safely married to a friend of his own, and one whom he could influence, if necessary, in the right direction, like Sydney Campion.

Campion was a handsome fellow, too, and popular, Sir John believed, with the ladies. It was all the more odd and unaccountable that Nan seemed to have taken a dislike to him. She would not talk about his doings; she would go out if she thought that he was likely to call. Sir John could not understand it. And Campion seemed shy of coming to the house in Eaton Square when the Pynsents returned to town; he was pleasant enough with Sir John at the Club, but he did not appear to wish for much social intercourse with Sir John's wife and sister. The worthy baronet would have been a little huffed, but for the preoccupation of his mind with other matters, chiefly political.

But this was in November and December; and he knew that Campion's mother had lately died, and that he was anxious about that clever sister of his, who had lately written a good novel, and then been ill, and had gone to Italy. There was that Walcott affair, too, which had lately come to Sir John's ears, a very awkward affair for Campion to have his sister's name mixed up in. Probably that was the reason why he was holding back. Very nice of Campion, very nice. And Sir John became doubly cordial in his manner, and pressed Sydney to dine with him next week.

With some reluctance, Sydney accepted the invitation. He had been perilously near making a fool of himself with Miss Pynsent, and he knew that she had found it out. It was quite enough to make him feel angry and resentful, and to wish to avoid her. At the same time, he was conscious of a feeling of regret that he had muddled matters so completely—for Miss Pynsent was a lovely girl, her violin-playing was delicious, she had sixty thousand pounds, and Sir John was his friend.

Sydney lost himself for a moment in a reverie.

"Not very likely," he said, waking up with a rather uneasy laugh. "At the best of times, I should never have had much chance. There are a good many reasons against it now." And it was with a slight shade upon his brow that he dismissed the matter from his mind and applied himself to business.

He need not have troubled himself. When he went to dine in Eaton Square, Miss Pynsent was absent. She had gone to spend the evening with a friend. Evidently, thought Sydney, with an odd feeling of discomfiture, because she wanted to avoid him. How ridiculous it was! What a self-conscious little fool she must be to take offense at a compliment, even if is were rather obvious, and not in the best possible taste! He began to feel angry with Miss Pynsent. It did not occur to him for some time that he was expending a great deal of unusual warmth and irritation on a very trifling matter. What were Miss Pynsent and her opinions to him? Other women admired him, if she did not; other women were ready enough to accept his flattery. But just because there was one thing out of his reach, one woman who showed a positive distaste for his society, Sydney, like the spoiled child of the world that he was, was possessed by a secret hankering for that one thing, for the good opinion of the woman who would have none of him. Vanity was chiefly to blame for this condition of things; but Sidney's vanity was a plant of very long and steady growth.

He saw nothing more of the Pynsents, however, until February, when, on the day of the first drawing-room, he ran up against Sir John in Piccadilly.

"Come along," said Sir John instantly, "I want you to come to my wife's. I'm late, and she won't scold me if you are with me. I shall use you as a buffer."

Sydney laughed and shook his head. "Very sorry, too busy, I'm afraid," he began.

But Sir John would not be baffled. He had put his hand within Sydney's arm and was walking him rapidly down —— Street.

"My dear fellow, we've not seen you for an age. You may just as well look in this afternoon. Nan's been presented to-day, and there's a drawing-room tea going on—a function of adoration to the dresses, I believe. The women will take it as a personal compliment if you come and admire them."

Mentally, Sydney shrugged his shoulders. He had had enough of paying compliments to Miss Pynsent. But he saw that there was no help for it. Sir John would be offended if he did not go, and really he had no engagement. And he rather wondered how Miss Pynsent would look in Court attire. She had worn a plain cotton and a flapping straw hat when he saw her last.

Lady Pynsent's drawing-room was crowded, but she greeted her husbarrd and Mr. Campion with great cordiality. She was wearing an elaborate costume of blue velvet and blush-rose satin, and bore an indescribable resemblance to a cockatoo. A dowager in black satin and two *débutantes* in white, who belonged to some country place and were resting at Lady Pynsent's house before going home in the evening, were also present ; but at first Sydney did not see Nan Pynsent. She had entered a little morning-room, with two or three friends of her own age, who wanted to inspect her dress more narrowly ; and it was not until Sydney had been in the room for five or ten minutes that she reappeared.

Was this stately and beautiful woman Nan Pynsent indeed? Sydney was not learned in the art of dress, or he might have appraised more exactly the effect produced by the exquisite lace, the soft white ostrich feathers, the milk-white pearls, that Nan was wearing on this memorable occasion. He was well accustomed by this time to the sight of pretty girls and pretty dresses ; but there was something in Miss Pynsent's face and figure which struck him with a new and almost reluctant sort of admiration.

He was looking at her, without knowing how intent his gaze had become, when she glanced round and caught his eye. She bowed and colored slightly ; then, after saying a word to Lady Pynsent, she came towards him. Sydney was uncomfortably conscious that her evident intention to speak to him made her a little nervous.

She held out her long, slim hand, and favored him with the pleasantest of smiles.

"How do you do, Mr. Campion? I have not met you for a long time, I think. How good of you to come to-day! Lady Pynsent is so pleased."

There was nothing for Sydney to do but to respond in the same gracious strain ; but he was certainly more reserved than usual in his speech, and behaved with an almost exaggerated amount of respect and formality. After the first two or three sentences he noticed that her eyes began to look abstractedly away from him, and that she answered one of his remarks at random. And while he was wondering, with some irritation, what this change might mean, she drew back into a bow window, and motioned to him almost imperceptibly to follow her. A heavy window curtain half hid them from curious eyes, and a bank of flowers in the window gave them an ostensible pretext for their withdrawal.

"Look at John's gloxinias," said Nan. "They came from Culverley, you know. Oh, Mr. Campion, I want to tell you—I'm sorry that I was so rude to you at Culverley last summer."

This proceeding was so undignified and so unexpected that Sydney was stricken dumb with amaze.

"Perhaps you have forgotten it," said Nan, coloring hotly; "but I have not. It all came from you not knowing who I was, I suppose—Mrs. Murray told me that she believes you thought I was the governess; and if I had been, how odd it must have seemed to you that I should talk about your duties to the Vanebury laborers! You know I have some property there, and so——"

"Oh, it was perfectly natural, and I never thought of it again," said Sydney lamely. But she went on unheeding—

"And then I felt vexed, and when you asked me for a flower"—how innocently it was said!—"I know I banged the door in your face. Selina said I must have been very rude to you. And so I was."

But Selina had not meant that she should acknowledge her "rudeness" to Mr. Campion, nor had Nan told her of the bold admiration that she had read in Sydney's eyes.

"Will you forgive me, Mr. Campion? You are such a friend of John's that I should not like to think I had offended you."

"You never offended me, Miss Pynsent. In fact, I'm afraid—I—was very dense." He really did not know what to say; Miss Pynsent's *naïveté* almost alarmed him.

"Then you are not angry with me?"

How lovely were the eyes that looked so pleadingly into his face! Was she a coquette? But he could only answer as in duty bound—

"Not angry in the very least, Miss Pynsent."

"I am so glad. Because I want to talk to you about Vanebury one day. But I must not stop now, for there are all these people to talk to, you know."

"I may ask you to forgive the stupidity of my mistake, then?" said Sydney quickly.

"It was not stupid: how could you know who I was?——There, John, I have been showing Mr. Campion your gloxinias. Don't you think them lovely, Mr. Campion?"

And she glided away with the sweetest smile, and Sydney, after a few words with Sir John, took his departure, with a feeling of mingled gratification and amusement which he found rather pleasant. So she had not thought him impertinent, after all? She did not seem to have noticed the compliment that he had tried to pay her, and which he now acknowledged to himself would have suited for Milly Harrington better than Sir John Pynsent's sister. Was she really as childlike as she seemed, or was she a designing coquette?

The question was not a very important one, but it led Sydney to make a good many visits to Sir John's house during the next few weeks, in order to determine the answer. Miss Pynsent's character interested him, he said to himself; and then she wanted to discuss the state of the working-classes in Vanebury. He did not care very much for the state of the working-classes, but he liked to hear her talk to him about them. It was a pity that he sometimes forgot to listen to what she was saying; but the play of expression on her lovely face was so varied, the lights and shadows in her beautiful eyes succeeded each other so rapidly, that he was a little apt to look at her instead of attending to the subject that she had in hand.

This was quite a new experience to Sydney, and for some time his mind was so much occupied by it that the season was half over before he actually faced the facts of the situation, and discovered that if he wanted to pluck this fair flower, and wear it as his own, Sir John Pynsent was not the man to say him nay.

BOOK IV.

SORROW.

"Wer nie sein Brod mit Thränen ass,
Wer nie die kummervollen Nächte
Auf seinen Bette weinend sass,
Er kennt Euch nicht, ihr himmlische Mächte!"

GOETHE.

CHAPTER XX.

"I WAS THE MORE DECEIVED."

MILLY HARRINGTON had passed two months at Birchmead, and her grandmother's neighbors were beginning to speculate on the probabilities of her staying over the summer.

"Poor soul; it's lonely for her," Mrs. Chigwin said to her friend, Elizabeth. "I do hope that Mr. Beadon, or whatever her husband's name is, will come back before very long. She must be fretting for him, and fretting's so bad for her."

"You think there is a husband to come, do you?" asked Mrs. Bundlecombe, mysteriously.

"Why not, Bessy? She says she's married, and she wears a wedding-ring; and her clothes is beautiful."

"I'd like to see her marriage lines," said Mrs. Bundlecombe. "But, there! maybe I'm hard on her, poor thing, which I ought not to be, seeing that I know what trouble is, and how strangely marriages do turn out sometimes. But if there is a husband in the case, it's shameful the way he neglects her, never coming to see her, and going abroad on business, as she says, while she stays with her grandmother!"

"She pays Mrs. Harrington," remarked Mrs. Chigwin, reflectively, "and she always seems to have plenty of money; but she do look sad and mournful now and then, and money's not everything to those that want a little love."

As she concluded her moral observation, she started up, for a shadow darkened the open doorway: and on looking up, she saw that Milly herself was standing just outside. The girl's beautiful face was pale and agitated; and there were tears in her eyes. The old woman noticed that she was growing haggard, and that there were black lines beneath her eyes; they exchanged significant looks, and then asked her to step in and sit down.

"You run about too much and fatigue yourself," said Mrs. Chigwin. "Now you sit there and look at my flowers, how still they keep; they wouldn't be half so fine if I was always transplanting them. You want a good, quiet home for yourself: not to be moving about and staying with friends, however fond of you they may be."

Milly had sunk into the chair offered to her, with a look of extreme exhaustion and fatigue, but at Mrs. Chigwin's words she sat up, and her eyes began to grow bright again.

"I think so myself, Mrs. Chigwin. I shall be glad to get back to my own nice quiet home again. As for looking tired, it is only because I have been packing up my things and getting ready to go. Mr. Beadon has written to me to join him in London, and I am going to start this very afternoon."

The rosy color came back into her face: she smiled triumphantly, but her lips quivered as she smiled.

"That's right, my dear. I don't approve of young husbands and wives living separate, unless there's some very good cause for it," said Mrs. Bundlecombe, thinking of her beloved Alan. "It always gives occasion to the enemy, and I think you're very wise to go back. Perhaps you had some little bit of a tiff or misunderstanding with Mr. Beadon——"

"Oh no," said Milly. The color in her face was painfully hot now. "Mr. Beadon is always very good and kind. But," she continued, looking down and pushing her wedding-ring to and fro, "he is very busy indeed, and he is obliged to go abroad sometimes on business. He travels —I think he calls it—for a great London house. He is getting on very well, he says, in his own particular line."

"Ah, that is nice!" said Mrs. Chigwin, comfortably. "And how glad you will be to see each other."

"Oh, yes," faltered Milly. There was a curiously pathetic look in her great blue eyes such as we sometimes see in those of a timid child. "Yes—very glad."

"And you'll bring him down here to see your grandmother, I suppose? She's not set eyes on him yet, has she? And how nice it will be for you to come down now and then—especially when you have a family, my dear, Birchmead being so healthy for children, and Mrs. Harrington such a good hand with babies——"

Suddenly, and to Mrs. Chigwin's infinite surprise, Milly burst into tears. The loud, uncontrolled sobs frightened the two old women for a moment; then Mrs. Chigwin got up and fetched a glass of water, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, and audibly expressing her fear that Milly's exertions had been "too much for her." But Mrs. Bundlecombe sat erect, with a look of something like disapproval upon her comely old face. She had her own views concerning Milly and her good fortune; and soft and kind-hearted by nature as she was, there were some things that Aunt Bessy never forgave. The wickedness of Alan's wife had hardened her a little to youthful womankind.

"I'm better, thank you," said Milly, checking her sobs at last, and beginning to laugh hysterically. "I don't know what made me give way so, I'm sure."

"You're tired, love," said Mrs. Chigwin, sympathetically, "and you're not well, that's easy to see. You must just take care of yourself, or you'll be laid up. You tell your good husband *that* from me, who have had experience, though without a family myself."

Milly wiped the tears away, and rose from her chair.

"I'll tell him," she said. "But—oh, there's no need: he takes an awful lot of care of me, you've no idea! Why, it was he that said I had better come to my grandmother while he was away: he knew that granny would take care of me; and now, you see"—with hasty triumph—"he wants me home again!"

She pocketed her handkerchief, and raised her head.

"I thought you said he had been abroad?" said Mrs. Bundlecombe.

"Of course I did, because he *has* been abroad," the girl said, laughing nervously. "But he's in London now. Well, good-bye, Mrs. Chigwin; good-bye, Mrs. Bundlecombe; you'll go in and comfort granny a bit when I'm gone, won't you? She's been fretting this morning about my going away."

"Bless you, love," said Mrs. Chigwin. "I'll go in every day if you think it will do her any good. And if you write to her, Milly, she'll be pleased, I'm sure."

"I *will* write," said Milly, in rather a shame-faced way. "I was so busy—or I'd have written oftener. Good-bye."

She looked at them wistfully, as if reluctant to take her leave; and her expression so wrought upon Mrs. Chigwin's feelings that she kissed the girl's cheek affectionately.

"Good-bye, love," she said; "you know where to find us when you want us, you know."

Milly departed, and the two friends remained silent until her light figure had passed the window, and the click of the garden gate told them that she was well out of hearing. Then Mrs. Chigwin began, in rather a puzzled tone:

"You weren't very hearty with her, Elizabeth. You looked as if you had something against her."

"I've this against her," said Mrs. Bundlecombe, smoothing down her black apron with dignity, "that I believe there's something wrong about that marriage, and that if I were Mrs. Harrington I wouldn't be satisfied until I'd seen her marriage lines."

"Perhaps she has seen them," said Mrs. Chigwin, the pacific. "And we've nothing to go upon, Bessy, and I'm sure the idea would never have entered my head but for you."

"Why did she burst out crying when you talked of her husband and children coming down here?" asked Mrs. Bundlecombe, acutely. "It may be that she isn't to blame; but there's something wrong somewhere. She's hurried and flurried and worried."

And this was true. The summons which Milly had received was of the briefest and least intelligible character. It was in a handwriting that she knew well, and although it was unsigned she was tremulously ready and eager to obey it at once. "Come back to your old lodgings at Hampstead," the writer said. "Do not stay any longer at Birchmead: I want you in London." And that was almost all.

Milly hovered all day long between alternations of wild hope and wild despair. If she had been accustomed to self-analysis, she herself might have been surprised to see how widely her present moods differed from those which had dominated her when she lived at Maple Cottage. She was then a vain, self-seeking little damsel, affectionate and uncorrupted, with an empty head, indeed, but an innocent heart. Now both self-seeking and vanity were being scourged out of her by force of the love which she had learnt to feel. She was little changed in manner, and an observer might have said that she was as childishly pleased as ever with a new gaud or a pretty toy; but behind the self-sufficiency of her demeanor, and the frivolity of her tastes, there was something new—something more real and living than mere self-indulgence and conceit. The faculty of giving and spending herself for others had sprung into being with the first love she had known. For the man with whom she had gone away from Lettice's house she was willing to lay down her life if he would but accept the gift. And when he seemed loath to accept it, Milly became conscious of a heart-sick shame and pain which had already often brought tears that were not unworthy to her pretty childish eyes. The strength of her own feelings frightened her sometimes: she did not know how to resist the surging tide of passion and longing and regret that rose and fell within her breast, as uncontrollable by her weak will as the waves by the Danish king of history. Poor Milly's soul had been born within her, as a woman's soul is often born through love, and the acquisition cost her nothing but pain as yet, although it might ultimately lead her to a higher life.

She arrived at the lodgings in Hampstead which had formerly been hers, about five o'clock in the afternoon. The landlady received her cordially, saying that "the gentleman had bespoke the rooms," and Milly was taken at once into the sitting-room, which looked west, and was lighted by a flood of radiance from the setting sun. Milly sank down on a sofa, in hopeless fatigue.

"Did he say that he would be home to-night?' 'she asked of the landlady.

"No, Mrs. Beadon, he didn't; but he said that he was very busy in the city and would write or send if he couldn't come himself."

"How was he looking?"

"Oh, very well, but a bit worried, I thought," said Mrs. Capper. "Now let me take your things, ma'am, and then I'll bring up the tea: you don't look as if your stay in the country had done you much good after all."

"Oh, I'm very well," said Milly, unfastening her mantle and coloring with nervousness under the woman's sharp eye. "I daresay Mr. Beadon will come to-morrow, if he doesn't come to-night."

But nobody came, although she sat up watching and waiting for many hours after Mrs. Capper had betaken herself to her bed. What did this silence and absence mean? Her heart contracted with a curious dread. She loved, but she had never believed herself capable of retaining love.

About eleven o'clock next day, she was informed that a gentleman wanted to speak to her. "A young-looking, fair gentleman, like a clerk," said Mrs. Capper. "Shall I show him up? It's from your good 'usband, most likely, I should think."

Milly started from the chair by the window, where she had been sitting. "Oh, show him up, at once, please."

With one hand on the table, and her delicate face flushed, she presented a picture of loveliness such as the man who entered did not often see. He even paused for a moment on the threshold as if too much amazed to enter, and his manner was somewhat uneasy as he bowed to her, with his eyes fixed in a rather furtive manner on her face.

He was a man of thirty-five, although his smooth-shaven face and fair hair made him look younger than his years. It was a commonplace countenance, shrewd and intelligent enough, but not very attractive. There was a certain honesty in his eyes, however, which redeemed the plainness of his insignificant and irregular features.

"Mrs. Beadon, I think?" he said. "My name's Johnson. I come from Mr.—Mr. Beadon with a message."

"Yes?" said Milly, her hand upon her side. "What is it, please? Tell me quickly—is he coming to-day?"

The man looked at her oddly. There was something like pity in his eyes.

"Not to-day, madam," he replied.

Milly sank down on her chair again and sighed deeply. The color left her cheeks.

"I have a communication to make, madam," said the clerk, rather hesitatingly, "which I am afraid may be a little painful, though not, Mr. Beadon tells me, unexpected by you. I hope that you will be prepared——"

"Go on," said Milly, sharply. "What is it? Why have you come?"

"Mr. Beadon wishes you to understand, madam, that he is going abroad again very shortly. He advises you to inform the landlady of this fact, which will explain his absence. But he also commissions me to put into your hands a sum for your present expenses, and to inform you that he will be quite willing to assist you at any time if you make application to him through me—at the address which I am to give you. Any personal application to himself will be disregarded."

"But, do you mean," said Milly, her cheeks growing very white, "that he is not coming—to say good-bye—before he goes abroad?"

"He thinks it better to spare you and himself an interview that might be unpleasant," said Mr. Johnson. "You understand, I suppose—a—that Mr. Beadon—my principal, that is—wishes to close his relations with you finally."

Milly started to her feet and drew herself to her full height. Her cheeks were blazing now, her eyes on fire. "But I am *his wife!*" she cried.

Johnson looked at her for a moment in silent admiration. He had not liked the errand on which he was sent, and he liked it now less than ever.

"Pardon me, madam," he said, in some embarrassment; "but Mr. Beadon is under the impression that you understand—that you have understood all along—that you were not legally in that position——"

"You mean," she said, her whole form quivering in her excitement, "that what he told me was false?—that when he said that our declaration before witnesses that we were man and wife was a true marriage—you mean that that was a lie?"

Johnson looked at the walls and the ceiling—anywhere but at poor Milly's agonized face.

"It was not a marriage, madam," he said, in a regretful tone.

"Then he—he—deceived me—purposely? Oh, he is wicked! he is base! And I thought myself—I thought myself——"

Her fingers clutched at the neck of her dress, as if to tear it open, and so relieve the swelling of her throat.

"Does he think that he can make it up to me with money? Oh, I'll take nothing from him any more. Let him go if he will, and his money too—I shall die and be forgotten—I won't live to bear the shame of it—the pain—the——"

She did not finish her sentence. Her slight form was swaying to and fro, like a reed shaken by the wind; her face had grown whiter and whiter as she went on: finally she flung up her arms and fell senseless to the floor. The end of all her hopes and fears—of all her joys and longing and desire, was worse to her than death.

Johnson lifted her to the sofa, with a sort of awkward tenderness, which perhaps he would not have liked to acknowledge to his master; and then, before summoning Mrs. Capper, he thrust into Milly's pocket the envelope containing the banknotes and the address which he had brought with him. He knew that his master was "doing the thing handsomely," as far as money was concerned, and he had no doubt but that the forsaken woman would see, when she had got over her first mad frenzy of despair, that she had better accept and use his gifts. So he stowed the envelope away in her pocket, so that it might not attract the curious eyes of prying servant or landlady.

Then he called to Mrs. Capper, and gave her a brief explanation of Milly's swoon. "The lady's a little overcome," he said. "Mr. Beadon has got to go abroad, and couldn't find time to see her before he went."

"Hard-heated brute!" said the landlady, as she chafed Milly's hands, and held a smelling-bottle to her nose.

"Oh, dear, no!" said Mr. Johnson, briskly. "Family ties must not stand in the way of business. I wish you good-day, and hope the lady will soon be better."

And he left the house rather hurriedly, for he had no desire to encounter the despairing appeal of Milly's eyes when she recovered from her swoon.

"It is a little too bad to make me his messenger," he said to himself. "He may do his dirty work himself another time. I thought she was quite a different sort of person. Poor thing! I wonder how he feels about her, or whether he feels anything at all."

He had an apportunity of putting his master's equanimity to the test when he made his report of the interview—a report which was made that very afternoon, in spite of his representations that Mr. Beadon had already gone abroad.

"Well, you saw her?" he was asked.

"Yes, sir. I said what you desired, and gave her the money."

"Any fuss?"

"She fainted—that was all," said Johnson, grimly.

"But she kept the money?"

"She had no choice. I put it into her pocket while she was unconscious, and then summoned the landlady."

"Ah, yes, that was right. And she understands——"

"Everything that you wish her to understand," said the clerk, with a touch of disrespect in his manner, which his employer noticed, and silently resented.

"Well, it had to be done, and the sooner the better," he said, turning away.

"So I suppose," said Johnson.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TONGUE OF SCANDAL.

ALAN returned to town with the full knowledge that he had something formidable to face and overcome.

He had gone to Birchmead partly in redemption of an old promise to his aunt, not knowing when he might be able to keep it if he did not do so now, and partly because his mind had been distracted by a fresh outbreak of violence in his wife, and he found it absolutely impossible to sit still and endure in patience.

The country journey refreshed him, and he came back stronger and braver than before. He was resolved to press for his divorce, and as Lettice was in Italy, no time could be better than the present for proving to the desperate woman, who was trying to terrify him, that there were laws in England to which she must yield obedience. He assured himself that he was now prepared for any fate; and yet that which had happened before he left town was an earnest of what he had to expect.

What had happened was this.

A few days before Cora had been served with a notice to appear and defend the suit for divorce which her husband was bringing against her; and this had set her inflammable soul on fire. She had tried hard to discover his whereabouts, without success. She had gone to Maple Cottage and banged at the door in such furious style, that a policeman, who happened to be passing, came up to see what was wrong, just as the new occupants made their appearance, in mingled alarm and indignation.

"I want Miss Campion," said Cora, who was half-intoxicated, but still more excited by rage and jealousy.

"She no longer lives here," said the man at the door.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. And I should not tell you if I did. Policeman, take this woman in charge for annoying me!

You must have seen her knocking like a fury—and now she is evidently tipsy."

Her rage increased rather than diminished when she found that her intended prey had escaped her, she began to declaim at the top of her voice, and to shriek hysterically; and the policeman, regarding it as a simple case of "drunk and disorderly," took her off to the station, where she was locked up.

The first that Alan heard of it was from the papers next morning. In one of these, which he was accustomed to read after breakfast, he found the following report:—

"At Hammersmith, a dissipated-looking woman, who gave the name of Cora Walcott, was charged with being drunk and disorderly on the previous day, and annoying Mr. Peter Humphreys, of Maple Cottage, Brook Green. Sergeant T 14 stated that he had observed the prisoner behaving in an extraordinary manner outside Mr. Humphreys' house, and knocking at the door in a most violent manner. As she would not go away, and her conduct was a serious annoyance to the neighbors, he was compelled to take her into custody. In reply to the prisoner, the witness said that she was undoubtedly drunk. She had asked for Miss Campion, and he had ascertained that that lady did previously live at Maple Cottage. She had told him that she was the wife of Mr. Alan Walcott, who had deserted her, after making an attempt on her life. The magistrate here interposed, and said that the prisoner's questions were totally irrelevant. What she had stated, even if true, was no excuse whatever for the conduct of which she had been guilty. Prisoner (excitedly): 'This woman had taken my husband from me.' Magistrate: 'Be silent.' Prisoner: 'Am I to starve in the streets, whilst they are living in luxury?' Magistrate: 'You are fined five shillings and costs. If you have grievances you must find another way of remedying them. If you say any more now, I shall have to send you to prison without the option of a fine.' The money was paid by a gentleman in court."

As soon as Alan had read this he went to the solicitor who knew all his affairs, and got him to go to the Hammersmith Police Court. The magistrate permitted him to make a statement contradicting the lies told by Cora, and the newspapers printed what he said. But how many persons read the first report who never saw the second?

And how many of those who read both preferred to believe the scandal, taking the contradiction as a matter of course?

The "gentleman in court" who paid Cora's fine was an enterprising reporter, who thought it might be worth his while to hear what this deserted wife had to say. He knew two or three papers which would welcome a bit of copy dealing with the marital troubles of a well-known literary man. The story of this French wife might be a tissue of lies—in which case it would be a real advantage to Mr. Walcott and Miss Campion to have it printed and refuted. Or it might be partly or wholly true—in which case it was decidedly in the interest of the public to make it known. The argument is familiar to everyone connected with a popular newspaper, and it proves that sensational journalists have their distinct place in the cosmogony of nature, being bound to print what is scandalous, either for the sake of those who are libelled or out of simple justice to those who start and spread the libel. This desire to give fair play all round, even to slanderers and malefactors, and the common father of these, is the crown and apex of civilization.

The consequence of this gentleman's activity was that Cora found plenty of assistance in her malicious design, to take away the characters of Alan and Lettice. The charges which she brought against her husband were printed and commented on in some very respectable newspapers, and were repeated with all kinds of enlargement and embellishment wherever the retailers of gossip were gathered together. If Alan had been under a cloud before, he was now held up to scorn as a mean-spirited creature without heart or conscience, who had allowed his lawful wife to sink into an abyss of degradation. However bad she might be, the blame certainly rested with him as the stronger. If it was impossible to live with her now, he might, at any rate, have stretched out his hand long ago, and rescued her from the slough of despond into which she had fallen.

This was not, of course, the universal judgment; but it was the popular one. It might not even have been the popular judgment a year before, or a year after, but it was the judgment of the day. The multitude is without responsibility in such cases, it decides without deliberation, and it often mistakes its instincts for the dictates of equity. Alan was judged without being heard, or what he did say in his defence was received as though it were the mere hard-swearing of a desperate man.

The storm had begun to rage when he went to Birchmead, and it reached its height soon after he returned. His lawyer advised him to bring an action for libel against one paper which had committed itself more deeply than the rest, and the threat of this had the effect of checking public references to his case; but the mischief was already done. Nothing could make him more disgusted and wretched than he had been for some time past, so far as his own interests were concerned. It was only the dragging of Lettice's name into the miserable business which now pained and tormented him.

But there was one who had more right than himself to come forward as the champion of Lettice's fair fame, and was able to do it with better effect. When a man is a Member of Parliament and a Queen's Counsel, he occupies a position which his fellow-countrymen are inclined to regard as one of very considerable dignity. Editors and sub-editors think twice before they print unsubstantiated rumors about the near relatives of such distinguished individuals as Mr. Sydney Campion, Q.C., M.P. Thus, after the first report of the proceedings at the police court, Lettice's name scarcely appeared again. She was, indeed, referred to as "the lady who seems, reasonably or unreasonably, to have excited the jealousy of the unfortunate wife," or "the third party in this lamentable case, also well-reputed in the world of letters, with whom the tongue of scandal has been busy;" but she was not mentioned by name. And therein the scandal-mongers exercised a wise discretion, for Sydney had secured the assistance of Mr. Isaacs, one of the smartest solicitors in London, who found means to impress upon everyone whom it might concern that it would be a very serious matter indeed to utter anything approaching to a libel on Miss Lettice Campion.

Moreover, the worthy Mr. Isaacs had an interview with Cora, whom he found in a sober mood, and so terrified her by his warnings and menaces, but most of all by the impressive manner and magnetic eye wherewith he was wont to overawe malefactors of every kind and degree, that she ceased for a time to speak evil of Lettice.

Yet in Lettice's case also the mischief had been done already. All who made a point of hearing and remembering the ill that is spoken of their fellow-creatures, knew what had been said of her, and retailed it in private for the amusement of their friends. The taint had spread from Alan to her, and her character suffered before the world for absolutely no fault of hers, but solely because she had the misfortune to know him. That was Sydney's way of putting it—and, indeed, it was Alan's way also, for there was no other conclusion at which it was possible to arrive.

It was a great consolation for both these men that Lettice was out of the country at this time. Sydney wrote to her, hinting as delicately as he could that it was essential to her interests and to his own that she should remain abroad for at least two or three months longer. Alan wrote about the same time to Mrs. Hartley, telling her in detail what had happened, and entreating her to put off her return to London as late as she could. It was not a time, he thought, to hesitate as to whether anything could justify him in making such a request.

Mrs. Hartley was treating Lettice very well at Florence, and had no intention of letting her come back in a hurry. She did not see fit to tell her of Alan's letter, for her recovery had been very slow, and fresh mental worry appeared to be the last thing to which she ought to be subjected. Nor was Lettice made aware of anything connected with Alan and his troubles, although her companion heard yet more startling news within the next few weeks. Mrs. Hartley had come to be very fond of Lettice, and she guarded her jealously, with all the tyranny of an old woman's love for a young one. The first thing, in her mind, was to get rid of the nervous prostration from which Lettice had been suffering, and to restore her to health and strength.

"We shall not go back to London," she said, in answer to a mild expostulation from her friend, "until you are as well as ever you were. Why should we? You have no ties there, no house, no friends who cannot spare you for a month or two. By and by you can begin to write, if you must write; but we shall quarrel if you insist on going back. What makes you so restless?"

"I am idle; and I hate to have nothing to do. Besides, how can one tell what is going on, so far away from all one's friends and connections? If one of your friends were in difficulties or danger, would you not wish to be near him (or her), and do what you could to help?"

"Of whom are you thinking, dear?" Mrs. Hartley turned round on her quickly as she asked this question.

"I put it generally," Lettice said, looking frankly at her friend, but feeling hot and troubled at the same time.

"Oh, it was a mere hypothesis?"

"Well, no; it was not."

"I am not questioning you, my darling. At least, I don't want to. But you can do no good to anybody just now—believe me! You must get quite well and strong, and then perhaps you can fight for yourself or for other people. I don't dispute your title to fight, when and where and how you like; and if ever I am in trouble, the Lord send me such a champion! But get strong first. If you went out with your shield this morning, you would come back upon it to-night."

So Lettice had to be patient yet awhile.

CHAPTER XXII.

LETTICE TRIUMPHS.

BUT there was news of another kind which Mrs. Hartley did not conceal from Lettice. Her novel had been published, and it was a great success. The critics, who already knew something of her literary powers, had with one consent written long and special articles about "Laurels and Thorns," hailing it as a veritable triumph. It was original, and philosophic, and irresistibly pathetic; the style sufficed to mark its author as one of the few novelists whose literary form was irreproachable. Perhaps the praise was here and there extravagant, but it was practically universal. And it was not confined to the critics. The reading world more than endorsed it. Second and third editions of the book were called for within a month. Writers of leading articles and speakers on public platforms began to quote and commend her.

Most remarkable of all, her novel made a conquest of her brother Sydney. He did not care for novels as a rule, but he read "Laurels and Thorns," and was desperately interested in it. Perhaps the phenomenal success which had crowned it had some effect upon him; and Lady Pynsent wrote him a nice letter of congratulation, expressing a great desire to know his "*distinguished* sister." At all events, the thing was done, and Lettice must now be definitely accepted as a writer of books. What chiefly puzzled him was to think where she had learned her wisdom, how she came to be witty without his knowing it, and whence proceeded that intimate acquaintance with the human heart of which the critics were talking. He had not been accustomed to take much account of his sister, in spite of her knack with the pen; and even now he thought that she must have been exceedingly lucky.

It will readily be supposed that the breath of scandal which had passed over Lettice was in no way a drawback to the triumph of her book. The more she was talked about in connection with that sorry business, the more her novel came to be in demand at the libraries, and thus she had some sort of compensation for the gross injustice which had been done to her. One small-minded critic, sitting down to his task with the preconceived idea that she was all that Cora Walcott had declared her to be, and finding in "Laurels and Thorns" the history of a woman who regarded the essence of virtue as somewhat more important than the outward semblance, attacked her vehemently for a moral obliquity which existed in his own vision alone. This review also stimulated the run upon her book, and carried it into a fourth edition.

Lettice's fortune was made. She had nothing to do for the remainder of her life but to choose where she would live, to take a house, to fill it with furniture, to gratify every reasonable want, on the one condition that she should devote herself to honest hard work, and give to her fellow-creatures the best that she was capable of producing.

It was all that her ambition had ever led her to desire, and it came to her at a time of life when her enjoyment was likely to be most keen and complete. Unless her own hand put aside the cup, it was hers to drink and to be satisfied

And what did Alan think of it? She wondered dimly now and then if he had read it, and what he thought of the words that she had spoken out of a full heart to him and to him alone. Did he guess it? And would he ever know? She would have been answered if she could have seen him on a certain day in April, when she was in Florence and he in London town.

Alan Walcott sat in his room, on the first floor of a house between the Strand and the River Thames, reading Lettice Campion's book. He had read it once, from beginning to end, and now he was turning back to the passages which had moved him most deeply, anxious not to lose the light from a single facet of the gem that sparkled in his hands. It would have been a gem to Alan even if the world had not seen its beauty, and he was jealous of those who could lavish their praise on this woman whom he knew and worshipped, when his own hard fate compelled him to be silent.

How well he recognized her thoughts and moods in every page of the story! How familiar were many of the reflections, and even the very words which she employed! Here and there the dialogue recalled to his mind conversations which he had held with her in the happy days gone by. In one case, at least, he found that she had adopted a view of his own which he had maintained in argument against her, and which at the time she had not been willing to accept. It rejoiced him to see the mark of his influence, however slight, upon one who had so deeply impressed her image on his mind.

The novel was a revelation to him in more ways than one. It was as if she had spoken to him, for himself alone, words of wisdom and comfort and encouragement. That, indeed, was precisely what she had done—consciously and of set purpose—though he did not know it. The plot went home to his heart. When the heroine spoke to the hero he seemed to catch the very tones of her voice, to see the lips in motion, and to read in her eyes the spirit and confirmation of the words. There was nothing in the incidents of "Laurels and Thorns" which resembled his own troubles or the relations which had existed between them—except the simple fact of the mutual intellectual and moral sympathy of the two central characters. The hero had won his crown of laurels and wore his crown of thorns; the heroine, who could not love him in his triumph, had loved him in his humiliation.

Both descended in the scale of material prosperity to rise in the scale of honor and mutual respect; the glory of life was extinguished, but it gave place to the glory of love. Alan read again and again the borrowed words with which Lettice's heroine concluded her written confession of love for the man whom she had once rejected, and who thought himself precluded by his disgrace from coming to her again.

"He fixed thee mid this dance
Of plastic circumstance,
This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent,
Try thee, and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

"What though the earlier grooves
That ran the laughing loves
Around thy base no longer pause and press?
What though, about thy rim,
Scull things in order grim
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?

"Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips a-glow!
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what needst thou with earth's wheel?"

These were words of comfort to Alan, if only he dare take them to himself, if he dare imagine that Lettice had had him in her mind as she wrote, and had sent him that message to restore his self-respect and save him from despair.

He sat for some time with the book before him, and then another thought came into his head. Why should he not write to her, just a few words to let her know that what she had written had gone home to his heart, and that amongst all her critics there was not one who understood her better than he? He was entitled to do this; it was almost due to himself to do it. He would take care not to make a fool of himself this time, as he had done in his first letter to her.

So he took a pen and wrote:

"I have read your book. You would not expect to find me amongst the critics: I only write to thank you for the pleasure and the courage it has given me. Some parts have fitted my case so exactly that I have applied them and made use of them, as any chance comer is permitted to do with any work of art.

" This is a great work you have produced, and I always knew that you would do great things. Count me not last of those who praise you, and who look to see your future triumphs. ALAN WALCOTT."

He put the letter in an envelope, sealed and addressed it. Then he leaned back in his chair, and began to muse again.

What a failure his life had been! He had told himself so a hundred times of late, but the truth of the verdict was more and more vivid every day. Surely he had set out from the beginning with good intentions, with high motives, with an honorable ambition. No man ever had a more just father, a more devoted mother, a happier home, a more careful and conscientious training. He had never seen a flaw in either of his parents, and it had been his single purpose to imitate their devotion to duty, their piety, their gentle consideration for all with whom they had to deal. It had struck him sometimes as almost strange (he had suspected once that it was a trifle unpoetical) that he had rather sought out than shunned his humbler relatives in the little shop at Thorley, taking the utmost care that their feelings should never be hurt by his more refined education and tastes. Of these three friends of his youth who were dead he could honestly say (but he did not say all this), that he had been dutiful to them, and that he had not wilfully brought sorrow upon any one of them.

Where had he gone so far astray as to merit, or even to bring about, the anguish which had fallen upon him? True, he had given himself to pleasure for the few years which succeeded his father's death. He had traveled, he had enjoyed the society of men and women, he had lived an idle life—except inasmuch as he aspired to be a poet, and wrote two or three volumes which the world had accepted and thanked him for, but the standard of his boyhood had never been rejected—he had been considerate of the feelings of every man and woman (Lettice alone, perhaps, having the right to deny it), and had not permitted himself one pleasure, or action, or relaxation, which might give pain to another. That had been his rule of life. Was it not enough?

He had teased himself, as thoughtful men and women often have done, and more often will do, about the problem of human morals. It had not occurred to him that the morals which have no conscious basis are likely to be more sound and permanent than those which are consciously built up; and, as a matter of fact, his own were of that kind, though he had his rule and considered himself to be guided by it. "That which gives no pain to another, and does not deteriorate another, or oneself, or any sentient being, cannot be immoral, though circumstances may make it inexpedient." He had written that sentence in his diary before he was twenty, at an age when the expanding soul craves for talismans and golden maxims, and he had clung to it ever since. For what violation of the law did he suffer now?

This was not Lettice's way of looking at it. The hero of her story was an urn in the hands of a divine artist, and a sterner stress was necessary for the consummate work. But he, Alan, was no hero. Horace' verse was nearer the mark with him.

Amphoræ coepit
Institui; currente rota cur urceus exit?

As water to wine were all the uses of his life henceforth, compared with that which might have been.

But, sad as he was, if Lettice could have read within his heart she would have been satisfied with her work.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"AM I A MURDERER?"

FOOTSTEPS outside his door roused Alan from his train of thoughts. Only his landlady came along that passage, for there were no lodgers on the same floor, nor on the one above it. A louder knock than Mrs. Gorman was wont to give made him start from his seat.

"Coma in!" he cried; but before the words were spoken the door was thrown open and Cora made her appearance. Alan turned sick at heart, and stood leaning on the end of the mantelpiece, gazing at her without a word.

"Ah, my dear," she said, with a little laugh of amusement as she saw the disconcerted look on his face, "they have not deceived me! They did not offer to conduct me, but they said I should find you here—first floor front—and here you are! It is long since we met, is it not? You have sent huissiers, and gendarmes, and police to bring me your messages, as a king to his subject, or a judge to a criminal. You should have come yourself, my friend, for I have longed to see you. Are you not glad that we meet thus, alone, face to face, without fear of intrusion?"

She had shut the door behind her, and sat down in his easy chair by the table, inviting him with a gesture to take a seat by her side.

"Approach!" she said, in a soft but mocking voice. "Be amiable! Let us talk. I come for peace, not for war. Let us make terms with each other. I am sick of this farce of hostility between husband and wife—let us arrange our little disagreements. Come!"

Her familiar tone was odious to him. The sudden perversion of his thoughts from Lettice to this creature, from his dream of purity and elevation to this degrading reality, filled him with disgust. Nay, something more than disgust entered his mind as he saw the smile on her besotted face. A demon of revenge seized upon him, and all but gained the mastery. For one instant he was perilously near to springing on her where she sat, and strangling the life out of her. All passions and all possibilities are in the soul of every one of us, at every moment; only the motive power, the circumstance, the incitement, are needed to make us cross the boundary of restraint. If Alan was not a murderer, it was not because the thing was impossible to him, but because at the crisis of temptation his heart had been penetrated by the influence of the woman whom he revered, and filled with higher thoughts—even through the channel of humiliation and self-contempt.

He answered her calmly.

"There is no arranging what has happened between us two—nor do you wish it any more than I. Say what you want to say, and go."

"Good! I will say what I want to say—but I will not go. I mean to stay with my husband; it is my right. Till death do us part—are not those the pretty words of the farce we played together?"

"Who made it a farce—did I?"

"Listen, my friend. This is one thing I want to say. Assuredly it was you, and no other, who made our marriage a miserable failure. You took me from a life I loved, from friends who loved me, from a freedom which I valued, and you made no effort to study my tastes and accommodate yourself to my habits."

"God knows I made the effort. But what were those tastes and habits? Think of them—think of them all! Could I have accommodated myself to all—even to those you concealed from me?"

"Bah! you should have known whom you had married. You were so blind and foolish, that I had a right to think you would never interfere with my liberty. I was the child of liberty—and liberty is a sacred possession, which it is an outrage to take away from any woman. You expected me to change, to become all at once another being, cold and impassive like yourself—while, as for you, you were to change in nothing! It was your duty to come to my level—at least to approach it. I would have met you half way; we could have made our contract, and I would have kept my part of the bargain. You demanded too much, and that is why you lost everything. I condemn you—humanity condemns you. The ruin was your work!"

"There is something novel in the theory, but I don't think many people would accept it." He was prepared to talk seriously with her, if she wished it, but no man could be serious in view of such a preposterous claim. So he fell back upon the cold, ironical calmness which exasperated Cora far more than a storm of rage would have done. "At any rate," he said, "I did not deprive you of your liberty. You retained that!"

"I kept it for myself. You would have taken it away, and you hated me for keeping it. I keep it still. I have been free to go where I would, free to wander over this terrible and desolate city, free now to come back to you, and stay with you, until you swear to cease your persecutions, and swear to make a new compact on more equitable terms."

"It is impossible to make terms with you, for you do not observe them. The law will bind you down more strictly. Meanwhile you cannot remain here, as you propose."

"Do you mean to throw me into the street?" she asked, passionately. "Alive or dead, I stay here until the compact is made."

"You need have no fear of me; I am not going to kill you."

"Fear! Of you! Do not flatter yourself, my friend!"

With an insulting laugh she plucked a thin stiletto from under her cloak, and brandished it before him. Alan recognized it as one which he had missed after her visit to Montagu Place.

"Look there! Would you like to feel if it is sharp, or will you take my word for it? We may want that before we part. I do not much care whether you use it or I; but I will not leave this room unless you concede all that I ask. Do not stand so far from me, coward. You smile, but you are afraid!"

"Why should I fear your play-acting? You will not touch me, for so long as I live you hope to get money from me, and if I were dead you would starve."

"Miserable hound! Do you not think that hate is stronger even than love of gold?"

"Not your hate. Throw that useless toy away. Love of gold and love of self make us both perfectly safe."

"Listen to my terms."

"No; they are refused before you ask them. The law is in motion—nothing shall prevent me from getting my divorce."

"That you may marry this woman!" she blazed forth, jumping from her seat, with Lettice's book in her hand. It had been lying before her, and the name had caught her eye. "You shall never marry her—I swear it by my father's grave. You shall never divorce me!"

She flung the book in his face.

"Let me pass!" he said, moving quietly to the door.

"Never!"

She seized the dagger, and stood before him, swaying with her violent emotion.

"Let me pass," he said again, still pressing forward.

She raised the weapon in her hand. Not a moment too soon he grasped her wrist, and tried to take it from her with his other hand.

There was a struggle—a loud scream—a heavy fall—and silence.

A minute later Mrs. Gorman, attracted by the noise, burst into the room.

Cora was lying on the floor, and Alan, with white face and bloody hand, was drawing the fatal weapon from her breast.

Mrs. Gorman's first act was to rush to the open window, and call for the police. Then she knelt by Cora's body, and tried to staunch the flowing blood.

A lodger from the floor beneath, who had come in behind the landlady, was looking at the prostrate body. He was a medical student, and perhaps thought it necessary to give his opinion in a case of this sort.

"She cannot live ten minutes," he said; but that did not prevent him from assisting Mrs. Gorman in her work.

Alan had staggered back against the wall, still holding the dagger in his hand. He scarcely knew what had happened, but the words of the last speaker forced themselves upon him with terrible distinctness.

"My God," he cried, "am I a murderer?"

And he fell upon the chair, and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOPELESS.

"If she dies," Graham said to his wife, in answer to Clara's anxious questioning, on the morning after Alan Walcott's arrest, "it will be a case of murder or manslaughter. If she gets over it he will be charged with an attempt to murder, or to do grievous bodily harm, and as there would be her evidence to be considered in that case the jury would be sure to take the worst view of it. That might mean five or ten years, perhaps more. The best thing that could happen for him would be her death, then they might incline to believe his statement, and a clever counsel might get him off with a few months' imprisonment."

"Poor man," said Clara, "how very shocking it is!" She was thinking not of Alan alone, but of Alan's friends. "Is there no hope of his being acquitted altogether?"

"How could there be? The evidence is only too clear. The landlady heard them quarrelling and struggling together, then there was a loud scream, and just as she entered the room the poor wretch was falling to the ground. Walcott had his hand on the dagger, which was still in his wife's breast. Then the other lodger came in, and he declares that he heard Walcott say he was a murderer. It seems as plain as it could possibly be."

"But think of the two, as we know them to have been, and the relations which have existed between them for years past. Surely that must tell in his favor?"

"We are not the jury, remember. And, as for that, it would only go to show a motive for the crime, and make a conviction all the more certain. No doubt it might induce them to call it manslaughter instead of murder, and the judge might pass a lighter sentence."

"I do hope she will not die. It would be terrible to have her death on his conscience."

"Well, of course, death is an ugly word, and no one has a right to wish that another might die. At the same time, I should say it would be a happy release for such a creature, who can have nothing but misery before her. But it will make little difference to him. He is entirely ruined, so far as his reputation is concerned. He could never hold his ground in England again, though he might have a second chance at the other side of the world. What Britain can't forget, Australia forgives. Heaven created the Antipodes to restore the moral balance of Europe."

"That is a poor satisfaction," said Clara, "to a man who does not want to live out of his own country."

"Unfortunately, my dear, we cannot always choose our lot, especially when we have had the misfortune to kill or maim somebody in a fit of passion."

"I cannot believe that it is even so bad as that. It must have been an accident."

"I wish I could think so; but if it is, no doubt the man may have the courage of his conscience, and then there will be nothing to prevent him from trying to live it down in London. I should not care for that sort of thing myself. I confess I depend too much on other people's opinions."

"It would be a terribe fight to live it down in London—terrible, both for him and his friends."

"Ah," said Graham, quickly, "it is a good thing that he has nobody in particular depending on him, no specially intimate friends that we are aware of."

Clara looked steadily at the wall for two or three minutes, whilst her husband finished his breakfast.

"I wrote to Lettice last night," she said at last, "but, of course, I knew nothing of this business then."

"I am very glad you did not. What on earth put Lettice into your head? She has no conceivable interest in this miserable affair."

"I think it is rather too much to say that she has no interest at all. We know that she was interested in him."

"We know that he is a married man."

Graham's tone was growing a little savage, as it did sometimes, especially with his wife, whom he very sincerely loved. But Clara did not heed the warning note.

"Facts are facts, and we should not ignore them. I am sure they like each other, and his misfortune will be a great grief to her."

"It was just what was wanted, then, to bring her to her senses. She may recognize now that Walcott is a man of ungovernable passions. In all probability he will be a convicted felon before she comes back to England, and she will see that it is impossible to know any more of him."

"Oh, James, how hard you are! She will never think of him as a felon. No more shall I!"

"He will be one, whatever you may think. As you said yourself, facts are facts, and they will have their proper influence upon you sooner or later."

"But do you think that Lettice is the woman to change her opinion of a man just because he is unfortunate, or to despise him as soon as he gets into trouble? I am perfectly sure she is not."

"We shall see," said Graham. "I give her credit for more sense. I don't think you recognize yet the sort of offence which Walcott has committed, so we may as well drop the subject for a time. I hope, however, that you will not do anything which might bring her home just now. Clearly she could not do any good, and even on your own showing it would be a needless vexation to her."

He went off to his study, and Clara set about her household tasks with a heavy heart.

The fact was that she could hardly doubt that Alan Walcott had injured his wife in a moment of desperation, when he was not fully responsible for his actions; but she certainly doubted the justice of any law which could condemn him as a murderer; or doom him to be an outcast amongst his fellowmen. Her sense of equity might have suited the Saturnian reign better than our matter-of-fact nineteenth century, in which the precise more or less of criminality in the soul of an accused man is not the only thing which has to be taken into consideration.

Was there ever a malefactor condemned to imprisonment or torment for whom the heart of some woman or other did not plead in mitigation of his sentence? Yet the man-made laws against which untutored hearts will now and again protest are often essentially merciful in comparison with the wild and hasty judgments that outrun the law—whether in mercy or in severity.

It was so in Alan's case. The popular opinion was evidently against him. The great majority thought this case of attempted wife-murder too clear for argument, and too cold-blooded to warrant anything like sympathy for the accused. Alan's private affairs had been made public property for some time past, and he now suffered from a storm of hostility and prejudice against which it was impossible to contend. His story, or the world's story about him, had been current gossip for the last few months, as the reader has already seen; and a large number of people appeared to have fixed upon him as a type of the respectable and hypocritical sinner, prosperous, refined, moving in good society and enjoying a fair reputation, yet secretly hardened and corrupt. It was not often that the underhand crimes of such men were plainly exposed to view, and, when they were, an example ought to be made of the offender as a warning to his class. Ever since Cora had gained a hearing in the police-court at Hammersmith, Alan was set down as a heartless libertine, who had grown tired of his wife, or, at any rate, as one who wanted to wash his hands of her, and throw the burden of maintaining her upon the rates. Thus it became quite a popular pastime to hound down "Poet Walcott."

This is how the outcry originally began. One or two newspapers with an ethical turn, which had borrowed from the pulpit a trick of improving the sensational events of the day for the edification of their readers, and which possessed a happy knack of writing about anything and anybody without perpetrating a libel or incurring a charge of contempt of court, had printed articles on "The Poet and the Pauper," "Divorce Superseded," and the like. Stirred up by these interesting homilies, a few shallow men and women, with too much time on their hands, began to write inept letters, some of which were printed; and then the editors, being accused of running after sensations, pointed to their correspondents as evidence of a public opinion which they could not control, and to which they were compelled to give utterance. They were, in fact, not dishonest but only self-deceived. They really persuaded themselves that they were responding to a general sentiment, though, such as it was, their own reports and articles had called it into existence. The "gentleman in court" who paid Cora's fine at Hammersmith began the outcry in its last and worst form, the editorials nursed and encouraged it, and the correspondents gave it its malignant character. All concerned in the business were equally convinced that they were actuated by the best possible motives.

The news that Walcott had stabbed his wife with a dagger did not take these charitable people by surprise, though it added fuel to the fire of their indignation. What else could be expected from a man who had first deserted and then starved the unfortunate woman whom he had taken to wife? It was only natural that he should try to get rid of her; but what a cruel wretch he was! Hanging would be too good for him if his poor victim should die.

It is unnecessary to say that a great deal of interest was displayed by the public, when the case came on for hearing at Bow Street; but no real facts were elicited beyond those which had already been in print. Two remands were taken, in the hope that Cora might recover sufficiently to give her evidence, but though she was at last declared to be out of danger, the house-surgeon at the hospital would not take the responsibility of saying that she could safely attend at the police-court. Ultimately, the magistrate having heard all the evidence that was forthcoming, and Alan's solicitor reserving his defence, the accused was committed to take his trial at the Central Criminal Court on a charge of wounding with intent to inflict grievous bodily harm.

Nevertheless, Alan was allowed to go out on bail. He had not cared to claim this privilege, and would almost have preferred to stay in prison. His solicitor had made much of the necessity of preparing his defence, and of the indispensable conferences between himself and his client; but Alan had not the slightest hope of being acquitted. He told Mr. Larmer precisely how the whole thing had happened—how his wife had brought the dagger with her, how she had raised it in her hand, how he seized her wrist, and how he had never touched the weapon himself until he drew it from the wound as she lay on the floor.

"They won't believe me," he said. "You know what a prejudice there is against me, and you will never persuade a jury to take my word against hers. She will certainly say that I stabbed her with my own dagger; and it was my dagger once: it has my name upon it."

"That is an awkward fact. If only we could prove that she brought it with her, it would go a long way towards acquitting you."

"But we can't prove it. Then, you see, Mrs. Gorman says I had my hand on the weapon as she was falling."

"We can easily shake her in that."

"And Hipkins says that I admitted the crime—called myself a murderer."

"We can shake that too. You said, 'Am I a murderer?' It was an odd thing to say, but your nerves were unstrung. Men in such predicaments have been known to say a great deal more than that."

"I assure you Larmer, my mind is so confused about it that I cannot remember whether I said 'Am I' or 'I am.' I rather incline to think that I said 'I am a murderer;' for I believed her to be as good as dead at the time, and I certainly thought I had killed her."

"How could you think that? You are clear in your mind that you never touched the dagger."

"Yes, but I touched the hand that held the dagger."

Larmer looked at his friend and client in a dubious way, as though he could not feel quite sure of his sanity.

"My dear Walcott," he said, "you are out of tune—upset by all this miserable business; and no wonder. You say you touched the hand that held the dagger that stabbed the woman. We know you did; what then? What moved the fingers that touched the hand that held the dagger, et cetera? Was it a good motive or a bad motive, tell me!"

That is just what I can't tell you, for I don't know. Perhaps it was an instinct of self-defence; but I have no recollection of being afraid that she would stab me. I had a confused notion that she was going to stab herself; perhaps, I only got as far as thinking that the bodkin would be better out of her hand."

"This is a touch of your old subtlety. I do believe you could work yourself up to thinking that you actually wanted to hurt her!"

"Subtlety or no subtlety, these impressions are very acute in my own mind. I can see the whole of that scene as plainly as I see you at this moment. It comes before my eyes in a series of pictures, vivid and complete in every twist and turn; only the motives that guided me are blurred and confused. I grasped her wrist, and she struggled frantically to shake me off. Our faces were close together, and there was a horrible fascination in her eyes—the eyes of a madwoman at that moment, beyond all question."

"I am convinced that she is mad, and has been so for years," said Mr. Larmer, positively.

"She was mad then, foaming at the mouth, and trying to bite me in her impotent fury. I could not hold her wrist firmly—she plunged here and there so violently that one or other of us was pretty sure to be hurt, unless I could force her to drop the murderous weapon. I was ashamed that I could not do it; but she had the strength of a demon, and I really wonder that she did not master me. Then the end came. Suddenly her resistance ceased. The desperate force with which I had been holding her hand must have been fully exerted at the very instant when her muscles relaxed—when the light went out of her eyes and the body staggered to the ground. It all happened at once. Did she faint? At any rate, my fingers never touched the dagger until after she was stabbed."

"It was a pure accident—as clear as can be; and the whole blame of it is on her own shoulders. She brought the weapon, she held it, she resisted you when you tried to prevent mischief. She, not you, had the disposition to injure, and you have not an atom of responsibility."

"That is your view, as a friend. It is not the view of the scandal-mongers outside. It will not be the view of the jury. And it is not my view."

"What do you mean?"

"I really do not know where my responsibility began or where it ended. I don't know if her strength failed her at the critical moment, or if it was simply overcome by mine —if, in fact, she was injured whilst resisting my violence. One thing I am sure of, and that is that my heart was full of hatred towards her. There was vengeance in my soul if not in my intention. Who is to discriminate between motives so near allied? Your friendship may acquit me, Larmer, but your instincts as a lawyer cannot; and at any rate, I cannot acquit myself of having entertained the feeling out of which crimes of violence naturally spring. To all intents and purposes I am on exactly the same footing as many a man who has ended his life on the gallows."

"I suppose you think that tribulation is good for your soul. I cannot see any other ground on which you torment yourself in this way about things you have not done and acts you have never contemplated. I understand that you entrusted me with your defence!" Mr. Larmer was waxing impatient—almost indignant—at his client's tone.

"So I do, entirely. Assuredly I have no desire to go to prison."

"Then for goodness' sake don't talk to anyone else the nonsense you have been talking to me!"

"I am not likely. I have known you since we were boys together, and I wanted to relieve my mind. It seemed right that you should know precisely what is on my conscience in the matter."

"Well, you have told me, and the effect of it has been to convince me more than ever of your innocence. But that sort of thing would scarcely convince anybody else. Now take my advice, and think as little about the case as possible. You cannot do any good—you will only demoralize yourself still more. Everything depends on how the judge and jury may be disposed to regard our story. I shall give a brief to the best man that can be had, and then we shall have done all that lies in our power."

"I know I could not be in better hands. If anyone could get me off scot-free you are the man to do it, Larmer. But I don't expect it, and I am not sure that I care for it."

Then they parted, and Alan went to Surrey Street and cleared out his goods and chattels, very much to the relief of Mrs. Gorman, who assured Mr. Hipkins that she could not have slept comfortably at night with that outrageous man under the same roof.

He found in his desk the message which he had written to Lettice on the day of his crowning misfortune.

"Thank heaven I did not send it," he muttered to himself, as he tore it in pieces. "One week has made all the difference. Nothing could ever justify me in speaking to her again."

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. LARMER GIVES A BRIEF.

Mr. Larmer was not insensible to the notoriety which attached to him as solicitor for the defence in a case which was the talk of the town, and a topic of the sensational press. Not that it gave him any satisfaction to make capital out of the misfortunes of a friend; but he would have been something more than man and less than lawyer if he had despised the professional chance which had come in his way.

And in fact he did not despise it. There were one or two inexact statements in the reports of the proceedings at Bow Street—he had written to the papers and corrected them. Several caterers for the curiosity of the public hashed up as many scandals as they could find, and served them hot for the entertainment of their readers. It happened that these tales were all more or less to the discredit of Alan Walcott, and to print them before his trial was grossly unfair. Mr. Larmer wrote a few indignant words on this subject also, and made about two in a thousand of the scandalmongers ashamed of themselves. Not content with this he supplied a friend with one or two paragraphs relating to the case, which had the effect of stimulating the interest already aroused in it. By this plan he secured the insertion of a statement in the best of the society journals, which put the matter at issue in a fair and unprejudiced way, dwelling on such facts as the pending divorce-suit, the fining of Mrs. Walcott at Hammersmith, her molestation of her husband on various recent occasions, and her intrusion upon him in Alfred Place. This article, written with manifest knowledge of the circumstances, yet with much reserve and moderation, was a very serviceable diversion in Alan's favor, and did something to diminish the odium into which he had fallen.

Mr. Larmer would not have selected trial by ordeal in the columns of the newspapers as the best preparation for a trial before an English judge and jury; but the process was begun by others before he had a word to say in the matter, and his efforts were simply directed to making the most of the situation which had been created. A mass of prejudice had been introduced into the case by the worthy gentlemen who maintain that in these evil days the press is the one thing needful for moral and political salvation, and who never lose an opportunity of showing how easy it would be to govern a nation by leading articles, or to redeem humanity by a series of reports and interviews. Alan had given himself up for lost when he found himself in the toils of this prejudice; but Mr. Larmer saw a chance of turning it to good account both for his client and for himself, and not unnaturally took advantage of the awakened curiosity to put his friend's case clearly and vividly before the popular tribunal.

Alan nearly upset the calculation of the lawyer by his impatience of the interviewing tribe. Half-a-dozen of them found him out at different times, and would not take his no for an answer. At last worried by the pertinacity of one bolder and clumsier than all the rest, he took him by the shoulders and bundled him out of his room, and the insulted ambassador, as he called himself, wrote to his employer a particularly spiteful account of his reception, with sundry embellishments perhaps more picturesque than strictly accurate.

The next thing that Mr. Larmer had to do was to retain counsel, and he determined to secure as big a man as possible to conduct the defence. The case had assumed greater importance than would attach to an ordinary assault upon a wife by her husband. It was magnified by the surrounding circumstances, so that the interest felt in it was legitimate enough, apart from the spurious notoriety which had been added to it. Alan's literary fame had grown considerably within the last year, and his friends had been terribly shocked by the first bald statement that he had stabbed his unfortunate wife in a fit of rage.

They had begun by refusing to believe it, then they trusted that he would be able to prove his innocence, but by this time many of his warmest admirers were assuring each other that, "after all, the artistic merit of a poem never did and never would depend upon the moral character of the poet." They hoped for the best, but were quite prepared for the worst, and thus they looked forward to the trial with an anxiety not unmingled with curious anticipation.

The indirect connection of Lettice Campion with a case of this kind was another intelligible reason for the concern of the respectable public. Lettice's name was in everybody's mouth, as that of the young novelist who had made such a brilliant success at the outset of her career, and all who happened to know how she had been mixed up at an earlier stage in the quarrel between Walcott and his wife, were wondering if she would put in an appearance, willingly or unwillingly, at the Central Criminal Court.

Mr. Larmer clearly saw that the business was sufficiently important to justify the intervention of the most eminent counsel. As he was running over the list and balancing the virtues of different men for an occasion of this sort, his eye fell on the name of Sydney Campion. He started, and sank back in his chair to meditate.

The idea of having Mr. Campion to defend a man with whom his sister's name had been unjustly associated was a bold one, and it had not occurred to him before. Was there any reason against it? What more natural than that this rising pleader should come into court for the special purpose of safeguarding the interests of Miss Campion? The prosecution would not hesitate to introduce her name if they thought it would do them any good —especially as they would have the contingency of the divorce case in their minds; and Campion was just the man to nip any attempt of that kind in the bud. At all events, the judge was more likely to listen to him on such a point than to anyone else. But would not the practice and etiquette of the bar put it absolutely out of the question.

The thing was worth considering—worth talking over with Campion himself. So Mr. Larmer put on his hat at once, and went over to the Temple.

"I have come to see you on a rather delicate matter," he said, by way of introduction, "as you will understand if you happen to have seen my name in connection with the Walcott assault case. There are sundry matters involved which make it difficult to keep the case within its proper limits, and I thought that an informal consultation on the subject, before I proceed to retain counsel, might facilitate matters."

"Perhaps it might; but I hardly see how I can help you."

"Well, it occurred to me that if you were in court during the trial, you would have the opportunity of checking anything that might arise of an irrelevant character—any references——"

"And what do you propose?" said Sydney, interrupting.

"It would be hard that we should be prevented from putting our case in the hands of such counsel as we consider best calculated to bring it to a successful issue. If there is no strong personal reason against it, but on the other hand (as it seems to me) an adequate reason in its favor, I trust that you will allow me to send you a brief."

"Let me ask you—did you come to me in any sense at the instance of your client?" said Sydney, suspiciously.

"By no means. Mr. Walcott does not know I have thought of you in connection with his defence."

"Nor at the instance of another?"

"Certainly not. It is entirely my own idea."

Sydney looked relieved. He could not ask outright if there had been any communication with his sister, but that was what he was thinking about.

"I hope we may rely upon you," said Mr. Larmer.

"I don't know. I am not sure that you can. This is, as you said, a perfectly informal conversation, and I may frankly tell you that what you ask is out of the question. I hope you will think no more about it."

Mr. Larmer was troubled.

"It seemed to me, Mr. Campion, that the idea would commend itself at once. I fear you did not quite take my meaning when I spoke of possible side issues and irrelevant questions which might arise during the trial?"

"Surely I did. You meant that counsel for the prosecution might think to advance his cause by referring to other proceedings, past or future, and might even go so far as to name a lady who has been most wantonly and cruelly maligned by one of the parties to this case ? ”

“ Exactly. You use the very words in regard to it which I would have used myself. That is a contingency, I imagine, which you would strongly desire to avoid.”

“ So strongly do I desire it, that you would not be surprised if I had already taken measures with that end in view.”

“ Decidedly not. But it will be only natural that the prosecution should try and damage Walcott as much as possible—showing the motive he would have for getting rid of his wife, and going into the details of their former quarrels. The question is whether any man can be expected, in doing this, to abstain from mentioning the names of third parties.”

“ Has it never occurred to you, Mr. Larmer, that there is one way, and only one way, in which I could certainly guaranteee that the name of the lady in question should not be mentioned? Your plan, if you will excuse my saying so, is clumsy and liable to fail. Mine is perfectly secure against failure, and perhaps a little more congenial.”

Larmer's face fell.

“ You do not mean,” he said, “ that you have taken a brief from the prosecution ! ”

“ If I had, I should have stopped you as soon as you began to speak, and told you so. But I may say as much as this—if I am retained by them I shall go into court ; and, if they retain anyone else, I shall have good reason to know that the case will be conducted precisely as I should conduct it myself. I imagine that this matters very little to you, Mr. Larmer. I have not done much with this class of cases, and there will be no difficulty in finding a stronger man.”

Mr. Larmer was silent for a minute or two. Sydney Campion's manner took him aback.

“ I am sorry to hear what you have said,” he remarked at last. “ I fear it must inevitably prejudice my client if it is known that you are on the other side.”

“ I don't see why it should,” Sydney said, with manifest indifference. “ At any rate, with respect to the point you were mentioning, it is clear that the lady's name will not be introduced by the prosecution.”

“ Let it be equally clear,” said Larmer, “ that it will not be introduced by the defence. This was the first instruction which I received from my client—who, I may say, was a schoolfellow of mine, and in whose honor, and not only honor, but technical innocence, I have the utmost confidence."

"You have undertaken his defence, and I am sure he is in very good hands," said Sydney with a rather cynical smile. "But, perhaps, the less said the better as to the honor of a married man who, under false pretenses, dares to pay attentions to an unmarried lady."

"Believe me you are mistaken! Alan Walcott has done nothing of the kind."

"He has done enough to create a scandal. You are not denying that his attitude has beeen such as to bring the name of the lady forward in a most objectionable manner, without the slightest contribution on her part to such a misfortune?"

"I do deny it, most emphatically, and I beg you to disabuse your mind of the idea. What possible ground can you have for such a charge? The mere tipsy ravings of this unfaithful wife—whom I should probably have no difficulty in proving insane, as well as unfaithful and intemperate. What is actually known is that she has been heard by the police, on one or two occasions, referring by name to this lady. How far would you as a lawyer, Mr. Campion, allow that fact to have weight as evidence in support of the charge? And can you mention, beyond that, one tittle of evidence of any kind?"

Sydney shrugged his shoulders.

"We are not considering evidence as you know very well. We are talking as two men of the world, quite competent to draw the right deduction from admitted facts. I say that when a lady has been so grievously insulted as Miss Campion has been, under circumstances of such great aggravation, the man who has brought that indignity upon her, however indirectly, must be held directly responsible for his conduct."

"It is useless to argue the point—the more so as I fancy that Mr. Walcott himself would be very much inclined to agree with you—which I am not. He most bitterly regrets the annoyance to which Miss Campion has been subjected, and regards it as the greatest of all the injuries inflicted upon him by his degraded wife. Having said this on his behalf, let me add that any charge brought against him on this score, by that woman or by anyone else, is absolutely without foundation, and that we shall know how to defend his reputation, in or out of court, whenever and by whomsoever it may be attacked."

"Your warmth does you credit, Mr. Larmer. I will be equally frank with you. You speak as a friend, I speak as a brother. After all that has happened I do not hold myself bound, nor do I intend, to consider anyone or anything in comparison with the credit of the name which has been so foully aspersed. It is for me to protect that name from discredit, and I shall adopt every expedient within my reach to carry out my purpose."

"No doubt you are perfectly justified in doing so. I will merely remark that hostility to my client cannot assist you in your object."

"Well," said Sydney, rising from his seat, "there can be no use in continuing the conversation." And he added, in a lighter tone, "I am sorry, Mr. Larmer, that I should be compelled to decline the first brief you have offered me."

Larmer went back to his office a little crestfallen, but not at all sorry that he had had this interview with Campion. He was better prepared now for the course which the trial was likely to follow. He had no doubt that Campion would be bold enough to undertake the prosecution, and that he would do his best to get a conviction against Walcott, whom he manifestly disliked. He was less sanguine from that moment as to the result of his efforts; but, of course, he did not relax them. He retained Mr. Charles Milton, a man with an excellent reputation in criminal business, and one who, as he thought, would do his utmost to avoid losing a case to Campion.

Milton, in effect, took the matter up with much zeal. He had (so far as his professional instinct allowed him) accepted the theory of Walcott's guilt, rather respecting him, if the truth were known, for refusing to put up any longer with the persecutions of a revolted wife. But he had no sooner received his brief in the case than he was perfectly convinced of Walcott's innocence. The story told him by Mr. Larmer seemed not only natural but transparently true, and when he heard that his club-mate of the Oligarchy was actively interested for the other side, he determined that no effort on his part should be wanting to secure a verdict.

Not that he had any grudge against Sydney; but they belonged to the same profession, the same party, and the same club—three conceivable reasons for Mr. Milton's zeal.

Thus Alan's defence was well provided for, and Mr. Larmer began to feel more easy in his mind.

When Alan heard that the prosecution was likely to be conducted by Sydney Campion, he took the news quietly, though it was a very serious matter for him. He did not doubt its seriousness, but his heart had already fallen so low that it could scarcely sink lower. He saw at once that the motive of Lettice's brother in angling for this brief (as Alan concluded that he must have done) was to protect the interests of Lettice; and so far, the fact was a matter of congratulation. It was his own great desire, as Larmer knew, to prevent her name from being mentioned, and to avoid reference to anything in which she had been indirectly concerned, even though the reference might have been made without using her name. When Larmer pointed out that this quixotism, as he called it, would make it almost impossible for his counsel to show the extreme malignity of his wife and the intolerable persecution to which he had been subjected, he had answered shortly and decisively,

"Let it be impossible. The first object is not my defence, but hers."

"Your vision is distorted," Larmer had said angrily. "This may seem to you right and generous, but I tell you it is foolish and unnecessary."

"I will not be guided in this particular thing," Alan rejoined, "by your reason, but by my feeling. An acquittal at her cost would mean a lifelong sorrow."

"If I know anything of women, Miss Campion, who does not quite hate you, would insist on having the whole story told in open court. Perhaps she may return to England in time for the trial, and then she can decide the point herself."

"Heaven forbid!" Alan had said. And he meant it. Worse than that, he tortured himself with the idea, which he called a firm belief, that Lettice had heard, or would hear, of his disgraceful position, that she would be unable to doubt that he had struck the fatal blow, and that he would be dropped out of her heart and out of her life, as a matter of course. How could it be otherwise? What was he to her, that she should believe him innocent in spite of appearances; or that, believing him merely unfortunate and degraded, she should not think less well of him than when he held his name high in the world of letters and in society?

"That dream is gone," he said. "Let me forget it, and wake to the new life that opens before me. A new life—born in a police cell, baptized in a criminal court, suckled in a prison, and trained in solitary adversity. That is the fate for which I have been reserved. I may be nearly fifty when I come out—a broken-down man, without reputation and without a hope. Truly, the dream is at an end; and oh, God of Heaven, make her forget me as though we had never met!"

So, when Mr. Larmer frankly told him all that Sydney Campion had said, Alan could not find it in his heart to blame Lettice's brother for his hostility.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN COURT.

No doubt it was from some points of view an unprofessional act of Sydney Campion to appear in court as counsel for the prosecution of Alan Walcott. Sydney knew that he was straining a rule of etiquette, to say the least of it; but, under the circumstances, he held himself justified in fishing for the brief.

The matter had been taken up by the Treasury, and Sydney had asked an intimate friend, who was also a friend of the Attorney-General, to give the latter a hint. Now Sir James was, above all things, a suave and politic man of the world, who thought that persons of position and influence got on best in the intricate game of life by deftly playing into each other's hands. When one gentleman could do something for another gentleman, to oblige and accommodate him, it was evidently the proper course to do it gracefully and without fuss. Campion's motives were clearly excellent. As he understood the business (although the ambassador put it very delicately indeed), a lady's reputation was at stake; and if Sir James prided himself on one thing more than another, it was his gallantry and discretion in matters of this kind. So he told his friend to go back and set Mr. Campion's mind at rest; and in the course of a day or two Sydney received his brief.

"Who is going to defend?" he asked his clerk, when he had glanced at his instructions.

"I heard just now that Larmer had retained Mr. Charles Milton."

"Charles Milton! The deuce! It will be a pretty little fight, Johnson!"

"They don't seem to have a leg to stand on; the evidence is all one way, even without the wife. I don't know what his story is, but it cannot have any corroboration —and hers is well supported."

"I am told she will be able to appear. She seems to be a terrible talker—that is the worst of her. I must keep her strictly within the ropes."

"The other side will not have the same motives," said Johnson, who knew all about the scandal which had preceded the assault, and who wanted to get his employer to speak.

"You think Mr. Milton will draw her on?"

"Sure to, I should say. If I were defending (since you ask me), I would not loose my grip until I had got her into a rage; and from all I hear that would make the jury believe her capable of anything, even of stabbing herself and swearing it on her husband."

"But, my good fellow, you are not defending him! And I'll take care she is not worked up in that fashion. Thanks for the suggestion, all the same. They will contend that it was done in a struggle."

"Against that, you have her evidence that the blow was deliberate; and I think the jury will believe her."

"They can't help themselves: motive, incitements, favoring circumstances, are all too manifest. And that just makes the difficulty and delicacy of the case for me. I want the jury to see the whole thing impartially, that they may do justice, without bias and without foolish weakness; and yet there are certain matters connected with it which need not be dwelt upon—which must, in fact, be kept in the background altogether. Do you see?"

"I think I do." Johnson was a good deal in Sydney's confidence, being a man of much discretion, and with considerable knowledge of the law. He felt that his advice was being asked, or at any rate his opinion, and he met Mr. Campion's searching gaze with one equally cool and serious.

"I have no doubt you know as much about it as I could tell you. You seem to hear everything from one source or another. Do you understand why it is that I am going into court? It is not altogether a regular thing to do, is it?"

"I suppose you wish to keep the evidence well in hand," Johnson replied, readily. "A lady's name has been used in a very unwarrantable manner, and—since you ask me—you have undertaken to see that there is no unnecessary repetition of the matter in court."

"Precisely so—no repetition at all."

"You will examine your own witness, and, of course, you need not go behind the scene in Surrey Street, at which the crime was actually committed—except in opening your case. What the jury will say is this: husband and wife on bad terms, separated, and divorce pending; wife comes to husband's rooms, reproaches him; recriminations; dagger handy on the table (very bad for him that); a sudden temptation, a sudden blow, and there's an end of it. No need to prove they were on bad terms, with all those facts before you."

"But then comes the defence."

"Well, sir, what is their line going to be? If they want to persuade the jury that she did it herself, or that it was an accident, they will not dwell upon all the reasons which might have tempted him to take her life. That would be weakening their own case."

"And Milton is capable of doing it!" said Sydney, talking to himself.

"But if they think the jury will be bound to believe that he stabbed her, no doubt they would go in for blackening her, and then they might cross-examine her about those other things."

"That is where the danger comes in."

Sydney's words were equivalent to another question, but Johnson preserved a perfectly stolid face. It was all very well for him to advise his employer, and work up his cases for him if necessary. He was accustomed to do both these things, and his help had been invaluable to Sydney for several years past. But it was out of his line to display more confidence than was displayed in him, or to venture on delicate ground before he had received a lead.

"Yes, that's were the danger comes in," Sydney repeated. "I have reason to believe that there is a disposition on their part to keep the lady's name out of the case; but they are not pledged to it; and if they find things looking very bad for Walcott, they may show fight in that direction. Then there is Mr. Milton—no instructions can altogether gag counsel. I don't know that I have ever given him cause of offence, but I have an instinctive feeling that he would rather enjoy putting me in a hole."

"I think you would have the judge with you in any objection which you might take."

"But it would be a misfortune, as things stand, even to have to take objection. Not only do I want to avoid the introduction of these extraneous matters, but I should strongly object to figure in any way as watching Miss Campion's interests. It would be very bad indeed for me to have to do that. What I desire is that her interests should at no moment of the trial appear, even to those who know the circumstances, to be involved."

"I quite see," said Johnson. "And since you ask me, I don't think you have much to fear. It is a delicate position, but both sides are of the same mind on the particular point, and it is most improbable that any indiscretion will occur. Prosecution and defence both want to avoid a certain pitfall—when they won't struggle on the edge of it. What do you say, Mr. Campion, to setting forth in your opening statement all that is known about their previous quarrels, not concealing that the woman has been rather outrageous, in her foreign fashion, but quietly ignoring the fact of her jealousy?"

"That would be too bold—it would excite her, and possibly move the defence to needless retorts."

"As for exciting her, if she is thoroughly convinced that his conviction will spoil his chance of a divorce, she will take the whole thing coolly enough. My idea was that by opening fully, and touching on every point, you would escape the appearance of shirking anything. And at the same time you would be suggesting these motives for violence on Walcott's part which, as you said, it would be their business to avoid."

"There is a good deal in that," said Sydney, reflectively. "It is worth considering. Yes, two heads are certainly better than one. I see that I am instructed to ask about the attempt on her life at Aix-les-Bains. Why, what a rascal the man has been to her! No wonder she is venemous now."

When the trial took place, the court was crowded with men and women who were anxious to see the principal actors in what was popularly known as the Surrey Street Mystery. They were both there—Alan pale and haggard from his long suspense, and Cora, much pulled down by what she had gone through. Of the two, she was, perhaps, the more interesting. Illness and loss of blood had done something to efface the dissipated look which had become habitual with her; she was languid and soberly dressed; and, moreover, she understood, as Mr. Johnson had said she would, that the conviction of her husband would put his divorce out of the question, at any rate for some time to come. So it was her business to look interesting, and injured, and quiet; and she was cunning enough to play this part successfully.

Alan, on the other hand, was completely indifferent as to the opinion which might be formed of him, and almost indifferent as to the verdict. When he came into court he looked carefully round at the women who were present among the spectators, but, not seeing the one face which he had both dreaded and hoped to see, he fell back into his former lethargy, and took very little interest in the proceedings.

Sydney Campion opened the case for the prosecution in a business-like way, just glancing at the unhappy relations which had existed between the prisoner and his wife for several years past, and freely admitting that there appeared to have been faults on both sides. He took the common-sense view of a man of the world speaking to men of the world, and did not ask the sympathies of the jury for the injured woman who had come straight from the hospital to that court, but only their impartial attention to the evidence which would be brought before them, and the expression of their deliberate opinion on the innocence or guilt of the accused.

Nothing could be more fair than his observations—or so it appeared to the majority of Campion's hearers. No doubt he had referred to the affair at Aix-les-Bains as though it were a matter of evidence, instead of mere allegation, and to the recent quarrels in England as though the "faults on both sides" had been clearly established. But he was supposed to be speaking in strict accordance with his instructions, and, of course, it was open to the defence to question anything which he had said.

Then came the evidence for the prosecution, the substance of which is already known to the reader; but Cora's account of the quarrel in Surrey Street was so ingeniously colored and distorted that Alan found himself listening with something like genuine amusement to the questions of counsel and the replies of his lying wife.

"And so," said Mr. Campion, after she had spoken of her earnest appeal for the renewal of friendship, and of her husband's insulting refusal, "you came to high words. Did you both keep the same positions whilst you were talking?"

"For a long time, until I lost patience, and then—yes, let me speak the whole truth—I threw a certain book at him."

Cora was on the point of saying why she threw the book, and whose name was on the title-page, but she checked herself in time. It had been very difficult to persuade her that her interests were safe in the hands of Lettice's brother, and even now she had ocasional misgivings on that point. Sydney went on quickly.

"A book lying close to your hand, you mean?"

"She said a certain book," Mr. Milton interjected.

"You must make allowance for her," said the judge. "You know she is French, and you should follow her in two languages at once. No doubt she meant 'some book or other.' The point has no importance."

"And then," said Sydney, "you altered your positions?"

"We stood facing each other."

"What happened next?"

"Suddenly—I had not moved—an evil look came in his face. He sprang to the table, and took from the drawer a long, sharp poignard. I remembered it well, for he had it when we were married."

"What did he do then?"

"He raised it in his hand; but I had leaped upon him, and then began a terrible struggle."

The court was excited. Alan and his counsel were almost the only persons who remained perfectly cool.

"It was an unequal struggle?"

"Ah, yes! I became exhausted, and sank to the ground."

"Before or after you were stabbed?"

"He stabbed me as I fell."

"Could it have been an accident?"

"Impossible, for I fell backward, and the wound was in front."

After Sydney had done with his witness, Mr. Milton took her in hand; and this was felt by every one to be the most critical stage of the trial. Milton did his best to shake Cora's evidence, not without a certain kind of success. He turned her past life inside out, made her confess her infidelity, her intemperance, her brawling in the streets, her conviction and fine at the Hammersmith Police Court. It was all he could do to restrain himself from getting her to acknowledge the reason of her visit to Maple Cottage; but his instructions were too definite to be ignored. He felt that the introduction of Miss Campion's name would have told in favor of his client—at any rate, with the jury; and he would not have been a zealous pleader if he had not wished to take advantage of the point.

By this time Cora was in a rage, and she damaged herself with the jury by giving them a specimen of her ungovernable temper. The trial had to be suspended for a quarter of an hour, whilst she recovered from a fit of hysterics; but it said much for her crafty shrewdness that she was able to adhere, in the main, to the story which she had told. She was severely cross-examined about the scene in Surrey Street, and especially about the dagger. She feigned intense surprise at being asked and pressed as to her having brought the weapon with her; but Mr. Milton could not succeed in making her contradict herself.

Then the other witnesses were heard and counsel had an opportunity of enforcing the evidence on both sides. Mr. Milton was very severe on his learned friend for introducing matter in his opening speech, on which he did not intend to call witnesses; but in his own mind he had recognized the fact that there must be a verdict of guilty, and he brought out as strongly as he could the circumstances which he thought would weigh with the court in his client's favor. Sydney was well content with the result of the trial as far as it had gone. There had been no reference of any kind to his sister Lettice; and, as he knew that this was due in some measure to the reticence of the defence, it would have argued a want of generosity on his part to talk of the cruelty of the prisoner in stopping his wife's allowance because she had molested him in the street.

The judge summed up with great fairness. He picked out the facts which had been sworn to in regard to the actual receiving of the wound, which, he said, were compatible with the theory of self-infliction, with that of wilful infliction by the husband, and with that of accident. As for the first theory, it would imply that the dagger had passed from the prisoner's hands to those of his wife, and back again, and it seemed to be contradicted by the evidence of the landlady and the other lodger. Moreover, it was not even suggested by the defence, which relied upon the theory of accident. An accident of this kind would certainly be possible during a violent struggle for the possession of the dagger. Now the husband and wife virtually accused each other of producing this weapon and threatening to use it. It was for the jury to decide which of the two they would believe. There was a direct conflict of evidence, or allegation, and in such a case they must look at all the surrounding circumstances. It was not denied that the dagger belonged to the prisoner, but it was suggested in his behalf that the wife had purloined it some time before, and had suddenly produced it when she came to her husband's apartments in Surrey Street. If that could be proved, then the woman had been guilty of perjury, and her evidence would collapse altogether. Now there were some portions of her evidence which were most unsatisfactory. She had led a dissolute life, and was cursed with an ungovernable temper. But, on the other hand, she had told a consistent tale as to the occurrences of that fatal afternoon, and he could not go so far as to advise the jury to reject her testimony as worthless.

His lordship then went over the remaining evidence, and concluded as follows:—

"Gentlemen, I may now leave you to your difficult task. It is for you to say whether, in your judgment, the wound which this woman received was inflicted by herself or by her husband. If you find that it was inflicted by her husband, you must further decide, to the best of your ability, whether the prisoner wounded his wife in the course of a struggle, without intending it, or whether he did at the moment wittingly and purposely injure her. The rest you will leave to me. You have the evidence before you, and the constitution of your country imposes upon you the high responsibility of saying whether this man is innocent or guilty of the charge preferred against him."

The jury retired to consider their verdict, and after about three-quarters of an hour they returned into court.

'Gentlemen of the jury," said the clerk, "are you agreed upon your verdict?"

"We are," said the foreman.

"Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

"We find him guilty of wounding, with intent to inflict grievous bodily harm."

Alan turned his face to the judge. The whole thing had been so precisely rehearsed in his mind that no mere detail would take him by surprise. He had expected the verdict, and it had come. Now he expected the sentence; let it come, too. It would hardly be worse than he was prepared for.

To say that Mr. Justice Perkins was dissatisfied with the verdict would be going a little too far; but he almost wished, when he heard it, that he had dwelt at greater length upon the untrustworthy character of Mrs. Walcott's evidence. However, he had told the jury that this was a matter for their careful consideration; and he had always been wont, even more than some of his brother judges, to leave full responsibility to his juries in matters of opinion and belief.

"Alan Walcott," he said to the convicted man, "you have had a fair trial before twelve of your peers, who have heard all the evidence brought before them, whether favorable to you or the reverse. In the exercise of their discretion, and actuated as they doubtless have been by the purest motives, they have found you guilty of the crime laid to your charge. No words of mine are necessary to make you appreciate this verdict. Whatever the provocation which you may have received from this miserable woman, however she may have forgotten her duty and tried you beyond endurance—and I think that the evidence was clear enough on these points—she was still your wife, and had a double claim upon your forbearance. You might well have been in a worse position. From the moment when you took that deadly weapon in your hands, everything was possible. You might have been charged with wilful murder, if she had died, or with intent to murder. You have been defended with great ability; and if the jury believed, as they manifestly did, that your defence, so far as concerns the introduction of the dagger, could not be maintained, then they had no alternative but to find as they actually did find. It only remains for me to pass upon you such a sentence, within the discretion left me by the law, as seems to be appropriate to your offence, and that is that you be imprisoned and kept to hard labor for the term of six calendar months."

Then the prisoner was removed; the court and the spectators dispersed to dine and amuse themselves; the reporters rushed off to carry their last copy to the evening newspapers; and the great tide of life swept by on its appointed course. No foundering ship on its iron-bound coast, no broken heart that sinks beneath its waves, disturbs the law-abiding ebb and flow of the vast ocean of humanity.

BOOK V.

LOVE.

"Let us be unashamed of soul,
As earth lies bare to heaven above!
How is it under our control
To love or not to love?"

ROBERT BROWNING.

CHAPTER XXVII.

COURTSHIP.

BUSY as Sydney Campion was, at this juncture of his career, public affairs were, on the whole, less engrossing to him than usual; for a new element had entered into his private life, and bade fair to change many of its currents.

The rector's education of his son and daughter had produced effects which would have astonished him mightily could he have traced their secret workings, but which would have been matter of no surprise to a psychologist.

He himself had been in the main an unsuccessful man, for, although he had enjoyed many years of peace and quiet in his country parish, he had never attained the objects with which he set out in life. Like many another man who has failed, his failure led him to value nothing on earth so highly as success. It is your fortunate man who can afford to slight life's prizes. The rector of Angleford was never heard to utter soothing sentiments to the effect that "life may succeed in that it seems to fail," or that heaven was the place for those who had failed on earth. He did not believe it. Failure was terrible misfortune in his eyes: intellectual failure, greatest of all. Of course he wanted his children to be moral and religious; it was indeed important that they should be orthodox and respectable, if they wanted to get on in the world; but he had no such passion of longing for their spiritual as he had for their mental development. Neither was it money that he wished them to acquire, save as an adjunct; no man had more aristocratic prejudices against trade and pride of purse than Mr. Campion; but he wanted them—and especially he wanted Sydney—to show intellectual superiority to the rest of the world, and by that superiority to gain the good things of life. And of all these good things, the best was fame—the fame that means success.

Thus, from the very beginning of Sydney's life, his father sedulously cultivated ambition in his soul, and taught him that failure meant disgrace. The spur that he applied to the boy acted with equal force on the girl, but with different results. For with ambition the rector sowed the seeds of a deadly egotism, and it found a favorable soil—at least in Sydney's heart. That the boy should strive for himself and his own glory—that was the lesson the rector taught him; and he ought not to have been surprised when, in later years, his son's absorption in self gave him such bitter pain.

Lettice, with her ambition curbed by love and pity, accepted the discipline of patience and self-sacrifice, set before her by the selfishness of other people; but Sydney gave free rein to his ambition and his pride. He could not make shift to content himself, as his father had done, with academic distinction alone. He wanted to be a leader of men, to take a foremost place in the world of men. He sometimes told himself that his father had equipped him to the very best of his power for the battle of life, and he was grateful to him for his care; but he did not think very much about the sacrifices made for him by others. As a matter of fact, he thought himself worth them all. And for the prize he desired, he bartered away much that makes the completer man: for he extinguished many generous instincts and noble possibilities, and thought himself the gainer by their loss.

In Lettice, the love of fame was also strong, but in a modified form. Her tastes were more literary than those of Sydney, but success was as sweet to her as to him. The zest with which she worked was also in part due to the rector's teaching; but, by the strange workings-out of influence and tendency, it had chanced that the rector's carelessness and neglect had been the factors that disciplined a nature both strong and sweet into forgetfulness of self and absorption in work rather than its rewards.

But already Nature had begun with Sydney Campion her grand process of amelioration, which she applies (when we let her have her way) to all men and women, most systematically to those who need it most, securing an entrance to their souls by their very vices and weaknesses, and invariably supplying the human instrument or the effective circumstances which are best calculated to work her purpose. Such beneficent work of Nature may be called, as it was called by the older writers, the Hand of God.

Sydney's great and overweening fault was that form of "moral stupidity" which we term selfishness. Something of it may have come with the faculties which he had inherited—in tendencies and inclinations mysteriously associated with his physical conformation; much had been added thereto by the indulgence of his parents, by the pride of his university triumphs, and by the misfortune of his association in London with men who aggravated instead of modifying the faults of his natural disposition. The death of his father had produced a good effect for the time, and made him permanently more considerate of his mother's and sister's welfare. But a greater and still more permanent effect seemed likely to be produced on him now, for he had opened his heart to the influences of a pure and elevating affection; and for almost the first time there entered into his mind a gradually increasing feeling of contrition and remorse for certain past phases of his life which he knew to be both unworthy in themselves and disloyal (if persisted in) to the woman whom he hoped to make his wife. By a determined effort of will, he cut one knot which he could not untie, but, his thoughts being still centred upon himself, he considered his own rights and needs almost entirely in the matter, and did not trouble himself much about the rights or needs of the other person concerned. He had broken free, and was disposed to congratulate himself upon his freedom; vowing, meanwhile, that he would never put himself into any bonds again except the safe and honorable bonds of marriage.

Thus freed, he went down with Dalton to Angleford for the Easter recess, which fell late that year. He seemed particularly cheery and confident, although Dalton noticed a slight shade of gloom or anxiety upon his brow from time to time, and put it down to his uncertainty as to the Pynsents' acceptance of his attentions to Miss Anna Pynsent, which were already noticed and talked about in society. Sydney was a rising man, but it was thought that Sir John might look higher for his beautiful young sister.

The Parliamentary success of the new member for Vanebury had been as great as his most reasonable friends anticipated for him, if not quite as meteoric as one or two flatterers had predicted. Meteoric success in the House of

Commons is not, indeed, so rare as it was twenty years ago, for the studied rhetoric which served our great-grandfathers in their ambitious pursuit of notoriety has given place to the arts of audacity, innovation, and the sublime courage of youthful insolence, which have occasionally worked wonders in our own day.

Sydney had long been a close observer of the methods by which men gained the ear of the House, and he had learned one or two things that were very useful to him now that he was able to turn them to account.

"We have put the golden age behind us," he said one day to Dalton, with the assured and confident air which gave him so much of his power amongst men, "and also the silver age, and the age of brass. We are living in the great newspaper age, and, if a public man wants to get into a foremost place before he has begun to lose his teeth, he must play steadily to the readers of the daily journals. In my small way I have done this already, and now I am in the House, I shall make it my business to study and humor, to some extent, the many-faced monster who reads and reflects himself in the press. In other times a man had to work himself up in *Hansard* and the Standing Orders, to watch and imitate the old Parliamentary hands, to listen for the whip and follow close at heel; but, as I have often heard you say, we have changed all that. Whatever else a man may do or leave undone, he must keep himself in evidence; it is more important to be talked and written about constantly than to be highly praised once in six months. I don't know any other way of working the oracle than by doing or saying something every day, clever or foolish, which will have a chance of getting into print."

He spoke half in jest, yet he evidently more than half meant what he said.

"At any rate, you have some recent instances to support your theory," Dalton said, with a smile. They were lighting their cigars, preparatory to playing a fresh game of billiards, but Sydney was so much interested in the conversation, that, instead of taking up his cue, he stood with his back to the fire and continued it.

"Precisely so—there can be no doubt about it. Look at Flumley, and Warrington, and Middlemist—three of our own fellows, without going any further. What is there in them to command success, except not deserving it, and knowing that they don't? The modest merit and perseverance business is quite played out for any man of spirit. The only line to take in these days is that of cheek, pluck, and devil-may-care."

"Do you know, Campion, you have grown very cynical of late?" said Brooke Dalton, rather more gravely than usual. "I have been rather disposed to take some blame to myself for my share in the heartless kind of talk that used to go on at the Oligarchy. I and Pynsent were your sponsors there, I remember. You may think this an odd thing to say, but the fact is I am becoming something of a fogy, I suppose, in my ideas, and I daresay you'll tell me that the change is not for the better."

"I don't know about that," said Sydney, lightly. "Perhaps it is for the better, after all. You see, *you* are not laying yourself out to persuade your fellow-men that you can cure them of all the ills that flesh is heir to! But I'll tell you what I have noticed, old man, and what others beside me have noticed. We miss you up in town. You never come to the Club now. The men say you must be ill, or married, or breaking up, or under petticoat government—all stuff and nonsense, you know; but that is what they say."

"They can't be all right," said Brooke, with a rather embarrassed laugh, "but some of them may be." He made a perfectly needless excursion across the room to fetch a cue from the rack that he did not want, while Sydney smoked on and watched him with amused and rather curious eyes. "I suppose I am a little under petticoat government," said Dalton, examining his cue with interest, and then laying it down on the table, "as you may see for yourself. But my sister manages everything so cleverly that I don't mind answering to the reins and letting her get me well in hand."

"No one ever had a better excuse for submitting to petticoat government. But you know what is always thought of a man when he begins to give up his club."

"I am afraid it can't be helped. Then again—perhaps there is another reason. Edith, you know, has a little place of her own, about a mile from here, and she tells me that she will not keep house for me much longer—even to rescue me from club life. The fact is, she wants me to marry."

"Oh, now I see it all; you have let the cat out of the bag! And you are going to humor her in that, too?"

"Well, I hardly think I should marry just to humor my sister. But—who knows? She is always at me, and a continual dropping——"

"Wears away the stony heart of Brooke Dalton. Why, what a converted clubbist you will be!"

"There was always a corner of my heart, Campion, in which I rebelled against our bachelor's paradise at the Oligarchy—and you would have opened your eyes if you could have seen into that corner through the smoke and gossip of the old days in Pall Mall."

"The old days of six months ago!" said Sydney, good-humoredly.

"Do you know that Edith and I are going abroad next week?"

The question sounded abrupt, but Dalton had not the air of a man who wants to turn the conversation.

"No," said Sydney, in some surprise. "Where are you going?"

"Well, Edith wants to go to Italy, and I should not wonder if we were to come across a cousin of mine, Mrs. Hartley, who is now at Florence. You know her, I believe?"

"I hardly know her, but I have heard a good deal about her. She has been very kind to my sister—nursed her through a long illness, and looked after her in the most generous manner possible. I am under great obligations to Mrs. Hartley. I hope you will say so to her if you meet."

"All right. Anything else I can do for you? No doubt we shall see your sister. We are old friends, you know. And I have met her several times at my cousin's this winter."

"At those wonderful Sunday gatherings of hers?"

"I dropped in casually one day, and found Miss Campion there—and I admit that I went pretty regularly afterwards, in the hope of improving the acquaintance. If I were to tell you that I am going to Florence now for precisely the same reason, would you, as her brother, wish me good speed, or advise me to keep away?"

"Wish you good speed?"

"Why, yes! Is not my meaning clear?"

"My dear Dalton, you have taken me absolutely by surprise," said Sydney, laying down his cigar. "But, if I understand you aright, I do wish you good speed, and with all my heart."

"Mind," said Dalton hurriedly, "I have not the least idea what my reception is likely to be. I'm afraid I have not the ghost of a chance."

"I hope you will be treated as you deserve," said Sydney, rather resenting this constructive imputation on his sister's taste. Privately, he thought there was no doubt about the matter, and was delighted with the prospect of so effectually crushing the gossip that still hung about Lettice's name. The memory of Alan Walcott's affairs was strong in the minds of both men as they paused in their conversation, but neither chose to allude to him in words.

"I could settle down here with the greatest pleasure imaginable, under some circumstances," said Brooke Dalton, with a faint smile irradiating his fair, placid, well-featured countenance. "Do you think your sister would like to be so near her old home?"

"I think she would consider it an advantage. She was always fond of Angleford. Your wife will be a happy woman, Dalton, whoever she may be—sua si bona norit!"

"Well, I'm glad I spoke to you," said Brooke, with an air of visible relief. "Edith knows all about it, and is delighted. How the time flies! We can't have a game before dinner, I'm afraid. Must you go to-morrow, Campion?"

"It is necessary. The House meets at four; and besides, I have arranged to meet Sir John Pynsent earlier in the day. I want to have a little talk with him."

"To put his fate to the touch, I suppose," meditated Brooke, glancing at Sydney's face, which had suddenly grown a little grave. "I suppose it would be premature to say anything—I think," he said aloud, "that we almost ought to be dressing now."

"Yes, we've only left ourselves ten minutes. I say, Dalton, now I think of it, I'll give you a letter to my sister, if you'll be kind enough to deliver it."

"All right."

"There will be no hurry about it. Give it to her whenever you like. I think it would be serviceable, and I suppose you can trust my discretion; but, understand me—you can deliver the letter or not, as seems good to you when you are with her. I'll write it to-night, and let you have it to-morrow morning before I go."

It would not have occurred to Brooke Dalton to ask for a letter of recommendation when he went a-courting, but Sydney's words did not strike him as incongruous at the time, and he was simple enough to believe that a brother's influence would weigh with a woman of Lettice's calibre in the choice of a partner for life.

Sydney delivered the letter into his keeping next day, and then went up to town, where he was to meet Sir John Pynsent at the Club.

Dalton had been mistaken when he conjectured that Sydney's intentions were to consult Sir John about his pretension to Miss Pynsent's hand. Sydney had not yet got so far. He had made up his mind that he wanted Anna Pynsent for a wife more than he had ever wanted any woman in the world; and the encouragement that he had received from Sir John and Lady Pynsent made him conscious that they were not very likely to deny his suit. And yet he paused. It seemed to him that he would like a longer interval to pass before he asked Nan Pynsent to marry him—a longer space in which to put away certain memories and fears which became more bitter to him every time that they recurred.

It was simply a few words on political matters that he wanted with Sir John; but they had the room to themselves, and Sydney was hardly surprised to find that the conversation had speedily drifted round to personal topics, and that the baronet was detailing his plans for the autumn, and asking Sydney to form one of his house-party in September. Sydney hesitated in replying. He thought to himself that he should not care to go unless he was sure that Miss Pynsent meant to accept him. Perhaps Sir John attributed his hesitation to its real cause, for he said, more heartily than ever.

"We all want you, you know. Nan is dying to talk over your constituents with you. She has got some Workmen's Club on hand that she wants the member to open, with an appropriate speech, so you had better prepare yourself."

"Miss Pynsent is interested in the Vanebury workmen. I shall be delighted to help at any time."

"Too much interested," said Sir John, bluntly. "I'll tell her she'll be an out and out Radical by and by. You know she has a nice little place of her own just outside Vanebury, and she vows she'll go and live there when she is twenty-one, and work for the good of the people. My authority over her will cease entirely when she is of age."

"But not your influence," said Sydney.

"Well—I don't know that I have very much. The proper person to influence Nan will be her husband, when she has one."

"If I were not a poor man——" Sydney began impulsively, and then stopped short. But a good-humored curl of Sir John's mouth, an inquiring twinkle in his eye, told him that he must proceed. So, in five minutes, his proposal was made, and a good deal earlier than he had expected it to be. It must be confessed that Sir John had led him on. And Sir John was unfeignedly delighted, though he tried to pretend doubt and indifference.

"Of course I can't answer for my sister, and she is full young to make her choice. But I can assure you, Campion, there's no man living to whom I would sooner see her married than to yourself," he said at the conclusion of the interview. And then he asked Sydney to dinner, and went home to pour the story into the ears of his wife.

Lady Pynsent was not so much pleased as was he. She had had visions of a title for her sister-in-law, and thought that Nan would be throwing herself away if she married Sydney Campion, although he was a rising man, and would certainly be solicitor-general before long.

"Well, Nan will have to decide for herself," said Sir John, evading his wife's remonstrances. "After all, I couldn't refuse the man for her, could I?" He did not say that he had tried to lead the backward lover on.

"Yes, you could," said Lady Pynsent. "You could have told him it was out of the question. But the fact is, you want it. You have literally thrown Nan at his head ever since he stayed with us last summer, You are so devoted to your friend, Mr. Campion!"

"You will see that he is a friend to be proud of," said Sir John, with conviction. "He is one of the cleverest men of the day, he will be one of the most distinguished. Any woman may envy Nan——"

"If she accepts him," said Lady Pynsent.

"Don't you think she will?"

"I have no idea. In some ways, Nan is so childish; in others, she is a woman grown. I can never answer for Nan. She takes such idealistic views of things."

"She's a dear, good girl," said Sir John, rather objecting to this view of Nan's character.

"My dear John, of course she is! She's a darling. But she is quite impracticable sometimes, as you know."

Yes, Sir John knew. And for that very reason, he wanted Nan to marry Sydney Campion.

He warned his wife against speaking to the girl on the subject: he had promised Campion a fair field, and he was to speak as soon as he got the opportunity. "He's coming to dinner next Wednesday; he may get his chance then."

But Sydney got it before Wednesday. He found that the Pynsents were invited to a garden party—a social function which he usually avoided with care—for which he also had received a card. The hostess lived at Fulham, and he knew that her garden was large and shady, sloping to the river, and full of artfully contrived sequestered nooks, where many a flirtation was carried on.

"She won't like it so well as Culverley," said Sydney to himself, with a half smile, "but it will be better than a drawing-room.

He did not like to confess to himself how nervous he felt. His theory had always been that a man should not propose to a woman unless he is sure that he will be accepted. He was not at all sure about Nan's feelings towards him, and yet he was going to propose. He told himself again that he had not meant to speak so soon—that if he saw any signs of distaste he should cut short his declaration altogether and defer it to a more convenient season; but all the same, he knew in his own heart that he would be horribly disappointed if fate deprived him of the chance of a decisive interview with Anna Pynsent.

Those who saw him at Lady Maliphant's party that afternoon, smiling, handsome, debonnair, as usual faultlessly attired, with a pleasant word for everyone he met and an eye that was perfectly cool and careless, would have been amazed could they have known the leap that his heart gave when he caught sight of Lady Pynsent's great scarlet parasol and trailing black laces, side by side with Nan's dainty white costume. The girl wore an embroidered muslin, with a yellow sash tied loosely round her slender waist; the graceful curve of her broad-brimmed hat, fastened high over one ear like a cavalier's, was softened by drooping white ostrich feathers; her lace parasol had a knot of yellow ribbon at one side, to match the tint of her sash. Her long tan gloves and the Maréchal Niel roses at her neck were finishing touches of the picture which Sydney was incompetent to grasp in detail, although he felt its charm on a whole. The sweet, delicate face, with its refined features and great dark eyes, was one which might well cause a man to barter all the world for love; and, in Sydney's case, it happened that to gain its owner meant to gain the world as well. It spoke well for Sydney's genuine affection that he had ceased of late to think of the worldly fortune that Nan might bring him, and remembered only that he wanted Nan Pynsent for herself.

She greeted him with a smile. She had grown a little quieter, a little more conventional in manner of late: he did not like her any the worse for that. But, although she did not utter any word of welcome, he fancied from her face that she was glad to see him; and it was not long before he found some pretext for strolling off with her to a shadowy and secluded portion of the grounds. Even then he was not sure whether he would ask her to be his wife that day, or whether he would postpone the decisive moment a little longer. Nan's bright, unconscious face was very charming, undisturbed by fear or doubt: what if he brought a shadow to it, a cloud that he could not dispel? For one of the very few times in his life, Sydney did not feel sure of himself.

"Where are you going this summer?" she asked him, as they stood beside the shining water, and watched the eddies and ripples of the stream.

"I usually go abroad. But Sir John has been asking me to Culverley again."

"You do not mean to go to Switzerland, then? You spoke of it the other day."

"No, I think not. I do not want to be so far away from—from London."

"You are so fond of your work: you do not like to be parted from it," she said smiling.

"I am fond of it, certainly. I have a good deal to do."

"Oh!" said Nan, innocently, "I thought people who were in Parliament did nothing but Parliamentary business—like John."

"I have other things to do as well, Miss Pynsent. And in Parliament even there is a good deal to study and prepare for, if one means to take up a strong position from the beginning."

"Which, I am sure, you mean to do," she said quickly.

"Thank you. You understand me perfectly—you understand my ambitions, my hopes and fears——"

She did not look as if she understood him at all.

"Are you ambitious, Mr. Campion? But what do you wish for more than you have already?"

"Many things. Everything."

"Power, I suppose," said Nan doubtfully; then, with a slightly interrogative intonation—"and riches?"

"Well—yes."

"But one's happiness does not depend on either."

"It rarely exists without one or the other."

"I don't know. I should like to live in a cottage and be quite poor, and bake the bread, and work hard all day, and sleep soundly all night——"

"Yes, if it were for the sake of those you loved," said Sydney, venturing to look at her significantly.

Nan nodded, and a faint smile curved her lips: her eyes grew tender and soft.

"Can you not imagine another kind of life? where you spent yourself equally for those whom you loved and who loved you, but in happier circumstances? a life where two congenial souls met and worked together? Could you not be happy almost anywhere with the one—the man—you loved?"

Sydney's voice had sunk low, but his eyes expressed more passion than his voice, which was kept sedulously steady. Nan was more aware of the look in his eyes than of the words he actually used. She cast a half-frightened look at him, and then turned rosy-red.

"Could you be happy with me?" he asked her, still speaking very gently. "Nan, I love you—I love you with all my heart. Will you be my wife?"

And as she surrendered her hands to his close clasp, and looked half smilingly, half timidly into his face, he knew that his cause was won.

But, alas, for Sydney, that at the height of his love-triumph, a bitter drop of memory should suddenly poison his pleasure at the fount!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SLUMBERING HEART.

TIME had hung heavily on Lettice's hands during the first month or two of her stay on the Continent. No one could have been kinder to her than Mrs. Hartley, more considerate of her needs and tastes, more anxious to please and distract her. But the recovery of her nerves from the shock and strain to which they had been subjected was a slow process, and her mind began to chafe against the restraint which the weakness of the body imposed upon it.

The early spring brought relief. Nature repairs her own losses as she punishes her own excess. Lettice had suffered by the abuse of her energy and power of endurance, but three months of idleness restored the balance. The two women lived in a small villa on the outskirts of Florence, and when they were not away from home, in quest of art or music, scenery or society, they read and talked to each other, or recorded their impressions on paper. Mrs. Hartley had many friends in England, with whom she was wont to exchange many thousand words; and these had the benefit of the ideas which a winter in Florence had excited in her mind. Lettice's confidant was her diary, and she sighed now and then to think that there was no one in the world to whom she could write the inmost thoughts of her heart, and from whom she could expect an intelligent and sympathetic response.

No doubt she wrote to Clara, and gave her long accounts of what she saw and did in Italy; but Clara was absorbed in the cares of matrimony and motherhood. She had nothing but actualities to offer in return for the idealities which were Lettice's mental food and drink. This had always been the basis of their friendship; and it is a basis on which many a firm friendship has been built.

Lettice had already felt the elasticity of returning health in every limb and vein when the news reached her of the success of her novel; and that instantly completed the cure. Her publisher wrote to her in high spirits, at each demand for a new edition, and he forwarded to her a handsome cheque "on account," which gave more eloquent testimony of his satisfaction than anything else. Graham sent her, through Clara, a bundle of reviews which he had been at the pains of cutting out of the papers, and Clara added many criticisms, mostly favorable, which she had heard from her husband and his friends. Lettice had a keen appetite for praise, as for pleasure of every kind, and she was intoxicated by the good things which were spoken of her.

"There, dear," she said to Mrs. Hartley one morning, spreading out before her friend the cheque which she had just received from Mr. MacAlpine, "you told me that my stupid book had given me nothing more than a nervous fever, but this has come also to pay the doctor's bill. Is it not a great deal of money? What a lucky thing that I went in for half profits, and did not take the paltry fifty pounds which they offered me?"

"Ah, you need not twit me with what I said before I knew what your book was made of," said Mrs. Hartley affectionately. "How was I to know that you could write a novel, when you had only told me that you could translate a German philosopher? The two things do not sound particularly harmonious, do they?"

"I suppose I must have made a happy hit with my subject, though I never thought I had whilst I was writing. I only went straight on, and had not the least idea that people would find much to like in it. Nor had Mr. MacAlpine either, for he did not seem at all anxious to publish it."

"It was in you, my darling, and would come out. You have discovered a mine, and I daresay you can dig as much gold out of it as will suffice to make you happy."

"Now, what shall we do with this money? We must have a big treat; and I am going to manage and pay for everything myself, starting from to-day. Shall it be Rome, or the Riviera, or the Engadine; or what do you say to returning by way of Germany? I do so long to see the Germans at home."

Mrs. Hartley was downcast at once.

"The first thing you want to do with your wealth," she said, "is to make me feel uncomfortable! Have we not been happy together these six months, and can you not leave well alone? You know that I am a rich woman, through no credit of my own—for everything I have came from my husband. If you talk of spending your money on anyone but yourself, I shall think that you are pining for independence again, and we may as well pack up our things and get home."

"Oh dear, what have I said? I did not mean it, my dearest friend—my best friend in the world! I won't say anything like it again: but I must go out and spend some money, or I shall not believe in my good fortune. Can you lend me ten pounds?"

"Yes, that I can!"

"Then let us put our things on, and go into paradise."

"What very dissolute idea, to be sure! But come along. If you will be so impulsive, I may as well go to take care of you."

So they went out together—the woman of twenty-six and the woman of sixty, and roamed about the streets of Florence like a couple of school-girls. And Lettice bought her friend a brooch, and herself a ring in memory of the day; and as the ten pounds would not cover it she borrowed fifteen; and then they had a delightful drive through the noble squares, past many a venerable palace and lofty church, through richly storied streets, and across a bridge of marble to the other side of the Arno; so onward till they came to the wood-enshrouded valley, where the trees were breaking into tender leafage, every shade of green commingling with the blue screen of the Apennines beyond. Back again they came into the city of palaces, which they had learned to love, and alighting near the Duomo sought out a *pasticceria* in a street hard by, and ate a genuine school-girl's meal.

"It has been the pleasantest day of my life here!" said Lettice as they reached home in the evening. "I have not had a cloud upon my conscience."

"And it has made the old woman young," said Mrs. Hartley, kissing her friend upon the cheek. "Oh, why are you not my daughter!"

"You would soon have too much of me if I were your daughter. But tell me what a daughter would have done for you, and let me do it while I can."

"It is not to do, but to be. Be just what you are and never desert me, and then I will forget that I was once a childless woman."

So the spring advanced, and drew towards summer. And on the first of May Mrs. Hartley, writing to her cousin, Edith Dalton, the most intimate of all her confidants, gave a glowing account of Lettice.

"My sweetheart here (she wrote) is cured at last. Three months have gone since she spoke about returning to England, and I believe she is thoroughly contented. She has taken to writing again, and seems to be fairly absorbed in her work, but you may be sure that I shall not let her overdo it. The death of her mother, and the break-up of their home, probably severed all the ties that bound her to London; and, so far as I can see, *not one of them* remains. I laughed to read that you were jealous of her. When you and Brooke come here I am certain you will like her every bit as much as I do. What you tell me of Brooke is rather a surprise, but I know you must be very happy about it. To have had him with you for six months at a time, during which he has never once been up to his club, is a great triumph, and speaks volumes for your clever management, as well as for your care and tenderness. We shall see him married and domesticated before a year has passed! I am impatient for you both to come. Do not let anything prevent you."

It was quite true that Lettice had set to work again, and that she appeared to have overcome the home-sickness which at one time made her long to get back to London. Restored health made her feel more satisfied with her surroundings, and a commission for a new story had found her just in the humor to sit down and begin. She was penetrated by the beauty of the Tuscan city which had been her kindly nurse, which was now her fount of inspiration and inexhaustible source of new ideas. A plot, characters, scenery, stage, impressed themselves on her imagination as she wandered amongst the stones and canvasses of Florence; and they grew upon her more and more distinctly every day, as she steeped herself in the spirit of the place and time. She would not go back to the picturesque records of other centuries but took her portraits from men and women of the time, and tried to recognize in them the descendants of the artists, scholars, philosophers, and patriots, who have shed undying fame on the queen-city of northern Italy.

Entirely buried in her work, and putting away from her all that might interfere with its performance, she forgot for a time both herself and others. If she was selfish in her isolation it was with the selfishness of one who for art's sake is prepared to abandon her ease and pleasure in the laborious pursuit of an ideal. Mrs. Hartley was content to leave her for a quarter of the day in the solitude of her own room on condition of sharing her idleness or recreation during the rest of their waking hours.

Had Lettice forgotten Alan Walcott at this crisis in the lives of both? When Mrs. Hartley was assuring her cousin that all the ties which had bound the girl to London were severed, Alan was expiating in prison the crime of which he had been convicted, which, in his morbid abasement and despair he was almost ready to confess that he had committed. Was he, indeed, as he had not very sincerely prayed to be, forgotten by the woman he loved?

It is no simple question for her biographer to answer offhand. Lettice, as we know, had admitted into her heart a feeling of sympathetic tenderness for Alan, which, under other circumstances, she would have accepted as worthy to dominate her life and dictate its moods and duties. But the man for whom this sympathy had been aroused was so situated that he could not ask her for her love, whilst she could not in any case have given it if she had been asked. Instinctively she had shut her eyes to that which she might have read in her own soul, or in his, if she had cared or dared to look. She had the book before her, but it was closed and sealed. Where another woman might have said, "I must forget him—there is a barrier between us which neither can cross," she said nothing; but all her training, her instinct, her delicate feeling, even her timidity and self-distrust, led her insensibly to shun the paths of memory which would have brought her back to the prospect that had allured and alarmed her.

Be it remembered that she knew nothing of his later troubles. She had heard nothing about him since she left England; and Mrs. Hartley, who honestly believed that Alan had practically effaced himself from their lives by his own rash act, was sufficiently unscrupulous to keep her friend in ignorance of what had happened.

So Lettice did not mention Alan, did not keep him in her mind or try to recall him by any active exercise of her memory; and in this sense she had forgotten him. Time would show if the impression, so deep and vivid in its origin, was gradually wearing away, or merely hidden out of sight. No wonder if Mrs. Hartley thought that she was cured.

Lettice heard of the arrival of the Daltons without any other feeling than half-selfish misgiving that her work was to be interrupted at a critical moment, when her mind was full of the ideas on which her story depended for its success. She had created by her imagination a little world of human beings, instinct with life and endowed with vivid character; she had dwelt among her creatures, guided their steps and inspired their souls, loved them and walked with them from day to day, until they were no mere puppets dancing to the pull of a string, but real and veritable men and women. She could not have deserted them by any spontaneous act of her own, and if she was to be torn away from the world which hung upon her fiat, she could not submit to the banishment without at least an inward lamentation. Art spoils her votaries for the service of society, and society, as a rule, takes its revenge by despising or patronizing the artist whilst competing for the possession of his works.

Brooke Dalton and his sister were lodged in an old palace not far from Mrs. Hartley's smaller and newer residence; and frequent visits between the two couples soon put them all on terms of friendly intimacy. Lettice had always thought well of Mr. Dalton. He reminded her of Angleford, and the happy days of her early youth. In London he had been genial with her, and attentive, and considerate in every sense, so that she had been quite at her ease with him. They met again without constraint, and under circumstances which enabled Dalton to put forth his best efforts to please her, without exciting any alarm in her mind, to begin with.

Edith Dalton captivated Lettice at once. She was a handsome woman of aristocratic type and breeding, tall, slender, and endowed with the graceful manners of one who has received all the polish of refined society without losing the simplicity of nature. A year or two younger than her brother, she had reached an age when most women have given up the thought of marriage; and in her case there was a sad and sufficient reason for turning her back upon such joys and consolations as a woman may reasonably expect to find in wedded life. She had been won in her girlhood by a man thoroughly fitted to make her happy—a man of wealth and talent, and honorable service in the State; who, within a week of their marriage day, had been thrown from his horse and killed. Edith had not in so many words devoted herself to perpetual maidenhood; but that was the outcome of the great sorrow of her youth. She had remained single without growing morose, and her sweet and gentle moods endeared her to all who came to know her.

With such a companion Lettice was sure to become intimate; or at any rate, she was sure to respond with warmth to the kindly feeling displayed for her. Yet there were many points of unlikeness between her and Edith Dalton. She too was refined, but it was the refinement of mental culture rather than the moulding of social influences. She too retained the simplicity of nature, but it was combined with an outspoken candor which Edith had been taught to shun. Where Lettice would be ready to assert herself, and claim the rights of independence, Edith would shrink back with fastidious alarm; where the one was fitted to wage the warfare of life, and, if need be, to stand out as a champion or pioneer of her sex, the other would have suffered acutely if she had been forced into any kind of aggressive combat.

When Brooke told his sister that he had met a woman whom he could love, she was unfeignedly glad, and never thought of inquiring whether the woman in question was rich, or well-connected, or moving in good society. Perhaps she took the last two points for granted, and no doubt she would have been greatly disappointed if she had found that Brooke's choice had been otherwise than gentle and refined. But when she saw Lettice she was satisfied, and set herself by every means in her power to please and charm her new friend.

As Mrs. Hartley knew and backed the designs of the Daltons, Lettice was not very fairly matched against the wiles and blandishments of the three. Brooke Dalton, indeed, felt himself in a rather ridiculous position, as though he were proceeding to the siege of Lettice's heart relying upon the active co-operation of his sister and cousin, to say nothing of her brother's letter which he carried in his pocket. But, after all, this combination was quite fortuitous. He had not asked for assistance, and he knew very well that if such assistance were too openly given it would do his cause more harm than good.

Dalton was one of those good-tempered men who are apt to get too much help in spite of themselves from the women-folk of their family and household, who are supposed to need help when they do not, and who have only themselves to thank for their occasional embarrassment of wealth in this particular form. Nature intends such men to be wife-ridden and happy. It is not alien to their disposition that they should spend their earlier manhood, as Dalton had done, amongst men who take life too easily and lightly; but they generally settle down before the whole of their manhood is wasted, and then a woman can lead them with a thread of silk.

It was for Lettice, if she would, to lead this gentle-hearted English squire, to be the mistress of his house and fair estate, to ensure the happiness of this converted bachelor of Pall Mall, and to bid good-bye to the cares and struggles of the laborious life on which she had entered.

The temptation was put before her. Would she dally with it, and succumb to it? And could anyone blame her if she did?

CHAPTER XXIX.

"IT WAS A LIE!"

Up the right-hand slopes of the Val d'Arno, between Florence and Fiesole, the carriage-road runs for some distance comparatively broad and direct between stone walls and cypress-hedges, behind which the passer-by gets glimpses of lovely terraced gardens, of the winding river far below his feet, of the purple peaks of the Carrara mountains far away. But when the road reaches the base of the steep hill on which the old Etruscans built their crow's-nest of a city—where Catiline gathered his host of desperadoes, and under whose shadow, more than three centuries later, the last of the Roman deliverers, himself a barbarian, hurled back the hordes of Radegast—it winds a narrow and tortuous way from valley to crest, from terrace to terrace, until the crowning stage is reached.

Here in the shadow of the old Etruscan fortifications, the wayfarer might take his stand and look down upon the wondrous scene beneath him. "Never," as Hallam says, "could the sympathies of the soul with outward nature be more finely touched; never could more striking suggestions be presented to the philosopher and the statesman" than in this Tuscan cradle of so much of our modern civilization, which even the untraveled islander of the northern seas can picture in his mind and cherish with lively affection. For was it not on this fertile soil of Etruria that the art and letters of Italy had birth? and was it not in fair Florence, rather than in any other modern city, that they were born again in the fulness of time? Almost on the very spot where Stilicho vainly stemmed the advancing tide which was to reduce Rome to a city of ruins, the new light dawned after a millennium of darkness. And there, from the sacred walls of Florence, Dante taught our earlier and later poets to sing; Galileo reawoke slumbering science with a trumpet-call which frightened the Inquisition out of its senses; Michael Angelo, Raffaelle, Da Vinci, Del Sarto created models of art for all succeeding time. Never was there in any region of the world such a focus of illuminating fire. Never will there live a race that does not own its debt to the great seers and creators of Tuscany.

Late on an autumn afternoon, towards the close of the September of 1882, four English friends have driven out from Florence to Fiesole, and, after lingering for a time in the strange old city, examining the Cathedral in the Piazza and the remains of the Roman Theatre in the garden behind it, they came slowly down the hill to the beautiful old villa which was once the abode of Lorenzo the Magnificent. The carriage waited for them in the road, but here, on the terrace outside the villa gates, they rested awhile, feasting their eyes upon the lovely scene which lay below.

They had visited the place before, but not for some months, for they had been forced away from Florence by the fierce summer heat, and had spent some time in Siena and Pistoja, finally taking up their residence in a cool and secluded nook of the Pistojese Apennines. But when autumn came, and the colder mountain breezes began to blow, Mrs. Hartley hastened her friends back to her comfortable little Florentine villa, proposing to sojourn there for the autumn, and then to go with Lettice and perhaps with the Daltons also, on to Rome.

"We have seen nothing so beautiful as this in all our wanderings," Lettice said at last in softened tones.

She was looking at the clustering towers of the city, at Brunelleschi's magnificent dome, and the slender grace of Giotto's Campanile, and thence, from those storied trophies of transcendant art, her gaze wandered to the rich valley of the Arno, with its slopes of green and grey, and its distant line of purple peaks against an opalescent sky.

"It is more beautiful in spring. I miss the glow and scent of the flowers—the scarlet tulips, the sweet violets," said Mrs. Hartley.

"I cannot imagine anything more beautiful," Edith Dalton rejoined. "One feels oppressed with so much loveliness. It is beyond expression."

"Silence is most eloquent, perhaps, in a place like this," said Lettice. "What can one say that is worth saying, or that has not been said before?"

She was sitting on a fragment of fallen stone, her hands loosely clasped round her knees, her eyes fixed wistfully and dreamily upon the faint amethystine tints of the distant hills. Brooke Dalton looked down at her with an anxious eye. He did not altogether like this pensive mood of hers; there was something melancholy in the drooping curves of her lips, in the pathos of her wide gaze, which he did not understand. He tried to speak lightly, in hopes of recalling her to the festive mood in which they had all begun the day.

"You remind me of two friends of mine who are just home from Egypt. They say that when they first saw the Sphinx they sat down and looked at it for two hours without uttering a word."

"You would not have done that, Brooke," said Mrs. Hartley, a little maliciously.

"But why not? I think it was the right spirit," said Lettice, and again lapsed into silence.

"Look at the Duomo, how well it stands out in the evening light!" exclaimed Edith. "Do you remember what Michael Angelo said when he turned and looked at it before riding away to Rome to build St. Peter's? 'Come te non voglio: meglio di te non posso.'"

"I am always struck by his generosity of feeling towards other artists," remarked Mrs. Hartley. "Except towards Raffaelle, perhaps. But think of what he said of Santa Maria Novella, that it was beautiful as a bride, and that the Baptistery gates were worthy of Paradise. It is only the great who can afford to praise so magnificently."

Again there was a silence. Then Mrs. Hartley and Edith professed to be attracted by a group of peasant children who were offering flowers and fruit for sale; and they strolled to some little distance, talking to them and to a black-eyed *cantadina*, whose costume struck them as unusually gay. They even walked a little in the shade of the cypresses, with which the palazzo seemed to be guarded, as with black and ancient sentinels; but all this was more for the sake of leaving Brooke alone with Lettice than because they had any very great interest in the Italian woman and her children, or the terraced gardens of the Villa Mozzi. For the time of separation was at hand. The Daltons were returning very shortly to England, and Brooke had not yet carried out his intention of asking Lettice Campion to be his wife. He had asked Mrs. Hartley that day to give him a chance, if possible, of half an hour's conversation with Lettice alone; but their excursion had not hitherto afforded him the coveted opportunity. Now, however, it had come; but while Lettice sat looking towards the towers of Florence with that pensive and abstracted air, Brooke Dalton shrank from breaking in upon her reverie.

In truth, Lettice was in no talkative mood. She had been troubled in her mind all day, and for some days previously, and it was easier for her to keep silence than for any of the rest. If she had noticed the absence of Mrs. Hartley and Edith, she would probably have risen from her seat and insisted on joining them; but strong in the faith that they were but a few steps away from her, she had thrown the reins of restraint upon the necks of her wild horses of imagination, and had been borne away by them to fields where Brooke's fancy was hardly likely to carry him—fields of purely imaginative joy and ideal beauty, in which he had no mental share. It was rest and refreshment to her to do this, after the growing perplexity of the last few days. Absorbed in her enjoyment of the lucent air, the golden and violet and emerald tints of the landscape; conscious also of the passionate joy which often thrills the nerves of Italy's lovers when they find themselves, after long years of waiting, upon that classic ground, she had for the time put away the thoughts that caused her perplexity, and abandoned herself to the sweet influences of the time and place.

The Daltons had been in Italy since May, and she had seen a great deal of Edith. Brooke Dalton had sometimes gone off on an expedition by himself, but more frequently he danced attendance on the women; and Lettice had found out that when he was absent she had a great deal more of him than when he was present. So much had Edith and Mrs. Hartley to say about him, so warmly did they praise his manners, his appearance, his manly and domestic virtues, and his enviable position in the world, that in course of time she knew all his good points by heart. She had actually found herself the day before, more as a humorous exercise of memory than for any other reason, jotting them down in her diary.

"B. D.—*testibus* E. D. et M. H.

"He is handsome, has a manly figure, a noble head, blue eyes, chestnut hair (it is turning grey—L. C.), a dignified presence, a look that shows he respects others as much as himself.

"He is truthful, simple in tastes, easily contented, lavishly generous (that I know—L. C.), knows his own mind (that I doubt—L. C.), is fond of reading (?), a scholar (? ?), with a keen appreciation of literature (? ? ?).

"He has one of the most delightful mansions in England (as I know—L. C.), with gardens, conservatories, a park, eight thousand a year.

"He is altogether an enviable man, and the woman who marries him will be an enviable woman (a matter of opinion —L. C.), and he is on the look-out for a wife (how would he like to have that said of him?—L. C.)."

Lettice had sportively written this in her diary, and had scribbled it out again; but it represented fairly enough the kind of ideas which Brooke Dalton's sister and cousin had busily instilled into her mind. The natural consequence was that she had grown somewhat weary of listening to the praises of their hero, and felt disposed to consider him as either much too superior to be thoroughly nice, or much too nice to be all that his womenfolk described him.

Of some of his estimable qualities, however, she had had personal experience; and, notably of his lavish generosity. A few days ago he had taken them all to the shop of a dealer of old-fashioned works of art and rare curiosities, declaring that he had brought them there for the express purpose of giving them a memento of Florence before they left the city.

Then he bade them choose, and, leaving Edith and Mrs. Hartley to make their own selection, which they did modestly enough, letting him off at about a sovereign apiece, he insisted on prompting and practically dictating the choice of Lettice, who, by constraint and cajolery together, was made to carry away a set of intaglios that must have cost him fifty pounds at least.

She had no idea of their value, but she was uneasy at having taken the gift. What would he conclude from her acceptance of such a valuable present? It was true that she was covered to some extent by the fact that Edith and Mrs. Hartley were with her at the time, but she could not feel satisfied about the propriety of her conduct, and she had a subtle argument with herself as to the necessity of returning the gems sooner or later, unless she was prepared to be compromised in the opinion of her three friends.

She had for the present, however, banished these unpleasant doubts from her mind, and the guilty author of her previous discomfort stood idly by her side, smoking his cigar, and watching the people as they passed along the road. The other ladies were out of sight, and thus Brooke and Lettice were left alone.

After a time she noticed the absence of her friends, and turned round quickly to look for them. Brooke saw the action, and felt that if he did not speak now he might never get such a good opportunity. So, with nothing but instinct for his guide, he plunged into the business without further hesitation.

"I hope you will allow, Miss Campion, that I know how to be silent when the occasion requires it! I did not break in upon your reverie, and should not have done so, however long it might have lasted."

"I am sorry you have had to stand sentinel," said Lettice; "but you told me once that a woman never need pity a man for being kept waiting so long as he had a cigar to smoke."

"That is quite true; and I have not been an object for pity at all. Unless you will pity me for having to bring my holiday to an end. You know that Edith and I are leaving Florence on Monday?"

"Yes, Edith told me; but she did not speak as though it would end your holiday. She said that you might go on to Rome—that you had not made up your mind what to do."

"That is so—it depends upon circumstances, and the decision does not altogether rest with us. Indeed, Miss Campion, my future movements are quite uncertain until I have obtained your answer to a question which I want to put to you. May I put it now?"

"If there is anything I can tell you—" said Lettice, not without difficulty. Her breath came quick, and her bosom heaved beneath her light dress with nervous rapidity. What could he have to say to her? She had refused all these weeks to face the idea which had been forcing itself upon her; and he had been so quiet, so unemotional, that until now she had never felt uneasy in his presence.

"You can tell me a great deal," said Brooke, looking down at her with increased earnestness and tenderness in his eyes and voice. Her face was half averted from him, but he perceived her emotion, and grew more hopeful at the sign. "You can tell me all I want to know; but, unless you have a good message for me, I shall wish I had not asked you my question, and broken through the friendly terms of intercourse from which I have derived so much pleasure, and which have lasted so long between us."

Why did he pause? What could she say that he would care to hear?

"Listen to me!" he said, sinking down on the seat beside her, and pleading in a low tone. "I am not a very young man. I am ten or twelve years older than yourself. But if I spoke with twice as much passion in my voice, and if I had paid you ten times as much attention and court as I have done, it would not prove me more sincere in my love, or more eager to call you my wife. You cannot think how I have been looking forward to this moment—hoping and fearing from day to day, afraid to put my fate to the test, and yet impatient to know if I had any chance of happiness. I loved you in London—I believe I loved you as soon as I knew you; and it was simply and solely in order to try and win your love that I followed you to Italy. Is there no hope for me?"

She did not answer. She could not speak a word, for a storm of conflicting feelings was raging in her breast. Feelings only—she had not begun to think.

"If you will try to love me," he went on, "it will be as much as I have dared to hope. If you will only begin by liking me, I think I can succeed in gaining what will perfectly satisfy me. All my life shall be devoted to giving you the happiness which you deserve. Lettice, have you not a word to say to me?"

"I cannot—" she whispered at length, so faintly that he could scarcely hear.

"Cannot even like me!"

"Oh, do not ask me that! I cannot answer you. If liking were all—but you would not be content with that."

"Say that you like me. Lettice, have a little pity on the heart that loves you!"

"What answer can I give? An hour ago I liked you. Do you not see that what you have said makes the old liking impossible?"

"Yes—I know it. And I have thrown away all because I wanted more! I spoke too suddenly. But do not, at any rate, forbid me still to nurse my hope. I will try and be patient. I will come to you again for my answer—when? In a month—in six months? Tell me only one thing—there is no one who has forestalled me? You are not pledged to another?"

Lettice stood up—the effort was necessary in order to control her beating heart and trembling nerves. She did not reply. She only looked out to the sunlit landscape with wide, unseeing eyes, in which lurked a secret, unspoken dread.

"Tell me before we part," he said, in a voice which was hoarse with suppressed passion. "Say there is no one to whom you have given your love!"

"There is no one!"— But the answer ended in a gasp that was almost a sob.

"Thank God!" said Brooke Dalton, as a look of infinite relief came into his face. "Then a month to-day I will return to you, wherever yòu may be, and ask for my answer again."

Mrs. Hartley and Edith came back from the garden terraces. With kindly mischief in their hearts, they had left these two together, watching them with half an eye until they saw that the matter had come to a climax. When Lettice stood up, they divined that the moment had come for their reappearance.

Lettice advanced to meet them, and when they were near enough Edith passed her hand through her friend's still trembling arm.

"Those dear little Italian children!" said Mrs. Hartley. "They are so beautiful—so full of life and spirits, I could have looked at them for another hour. Now, good people, what is going to be done? We must be getting home. Brooke, can you see the carriage? You might find it, and tell the driver to come back for us."

Brooke started off with alacrity, and the women were left alone. Then Edith began to chatter about nothing, in the most resolute fashion, in order that Lettice might have time to pull herself together.

She was glad of their consideration, for indeed she needed all her fortitude. What meant this suffocation of the heart, which almost prevented her from breathing? It ached in her bosom as though someone had grasped it with a hand of ice; she shuddered as though a ghost had been sitting by her and pleading with her, instead of a lover. Her own name echoed in her ears, and she remembered that Brooke Dalton had called her "Lettice." But it was not his voice which was calling to her now.

Dalton presently reappeared with the news that the carriage was waiting for them in the road below.

So in an hour from that time they were at home again, and Lettice was able to get to her own room, and to think of what had happened.

If amongst those who read the story of her life Lettice Campion has made for herself a few discriminating friends, they will not need to be reminded that she was not by any means a perfect character. She was, in her way, quite as ambitious as her brother Sydney, although not quite so eager in pursuit of her own ends, her own pleasure and satisfaction. She was also more scrupulous than Sydney to the means which she would adopt for the attainment of her objects, and she desired that others should share with her the good things which fell to her lot; but she had never been taught, or had never adopted the rule, that mere self-denial, for self-denial's sake, was the soundest basis of morality and conduct. She was thoroughly and keenly human, and she did but follow her natural bent, without distortion and without selfishness, in seeking to give happiness to herself as well as to others.

Brooke Dalton's offer of marriage placed a great temptation before her. All the happiness that money, and position, and affection, and a luxurious home could afford was hers if she would have it; and these were things which she valued very highly. Edith Dalton had done her best to make her friend realize what it would mean to be the mistress of Brooke's house; and poor Lettice, with all her magnanimity, was dazzled in spite of herself, and did not quite see why she should say No, when Brooke made her his offer. And yet her heart cried out against accepting it.

She had needed time to think, and now the process was already beginning. He had given her a month to decide whether she could love him—or even like him well enough to become his wife. Nothing could be more generous, and indeed she knew that he was the soul of generosity and consideration. A month to make up her mind whether she would accept from him all that makes life pleasant, and joyful, and easy, and comfortable; or whether she would turn her back upon the temptation, and shun delights, and live laborious days.

Could she hesitate? What woman with nothing to depend upon except her own exertions, and urged to assent (as she would be) by her only intimate friends, would have hesitated in her place? Yet she did hesitate, and it was necessary to weigh the reasons against accepting, as she had dwelt upon the reasons in favor of it.

If it was easy to imagine that life at Angleford Manor might be very peaceful and luxurious, there could be no doubt that she would have to purchase her pleasure at the cost of a great deal of her independence. She might be able to write, in casual and ornamental fashion; but she felt that there would be little real sympathy with her literary occupations, and the zest of effort and ambition which she now felt would be gone. Moreover, independence of action counted for very little in comparison with indedence of thought—and how could she nurse her somewhat heretical ideas in the drawing-room of a Tory High Church squire, a member of the Oligarchy, whose friends would nearly all be like-minded with himself? She had no right to introduce so great a discord into his life. If she married him, she would at any rate try (consciously or unconsciously) to adopt his views, as the proper basis of the partnership; and therefore to marry him unquestionably meant the sacrifice of her independent judgment.

So much for the intellectual and material sides of the question. But, Lettice asked herself, was that all?

No, there was something else. She had been steadily and obstinately, yet almost unconsciously, trying to push it away from her all the time—ever since Brooke Dalton began to betray his affection, and even before that when Mrs. Hartley, unknown to her, kept her in ignorance of things which she ought to have known. She had refused to face it, pressed it out of her heart, made believe to herself that the chapter of her life which had been written in London was closed and forgotten—and how nearly she had succeeded! But she had not quite succeeded. It was there still—the memory, the hope, the pity, the sacrifice.

She must not cheat herself any longer, if she would be an honest and honorable woman. She would face the truth and not palter with it, now that the crisis had really come. What was Alan Walcott to her? Could she forget him, and dismiss him from her thoughts, and go to the altar with another man? She went over the scenes which they had enacted together, she recalled his words and his letters, she thought of his sorrows and trials, and remembered how he had appealed to her for sympathy. There was good reason, she thought, why he had not written to her, for he was barred by something more than worldly conventionality. When she, strong-minded as she thought herself, had shrunk from the display of his love because he still had duties to his lawful wife, she had imposed upon him her demand for conventional and punctilious respect, and had rather despised herself, she now remembered, for doing it. He had obeyed her, he had observed her slightest wishes—it was for her, not for him, to break through the silence. How had she been able to remain so long in ignorance of his condition, to live contentedly so many miles away from him?

As she thought of all these things in the light of her new experience, her heart was touched again by the old sympathy, and throbbed once more with the music which it had not known since her illness began. It was a harp which had been laid aside and forgotten, till the owner, coming by chance into the disused room, strung it anew, and bade it discourse the symphonies of the olden time.

Not until Lettice had reached this point in her retrospect did she perceive how near she had gone to the dividing line which separates honor from faithlessness and truth from falsehood. She had said, "There is no one to whom my love is pledged." Was that true? Which is stronger or more sacred—the pledge of words or the pledge of feeling? She had tried to drown the feeling, but it would not die. It was there, it had never been absent; and she had profaned it by listening to the temptations of Brooke Dalton, and by telling him that her heart was free.

"It was a lie!"

She sank on the sofa as she made the confession to herself. Alan's letters were in her hand; she clasped them to her breast, and murmured,

"It was a lie—for I love you!"

If the poor wretch in his prison cell, who, worn out at last by daily self-consuming doubts, lay tossing with fever on a restless bed, could have heard her words and seen her action, he might have been called back to life from the borderland of the grave.

CHAPTER XXX.

AWAKENED.

"WHAT is it, darling?" Mrs. Hartley said to her friend when they met the next morning at the late breakfast which, out of deference to foreign customs, they had adopted. She looked observantly at the restless movements of the girl, and the changing color in her cheeks. "You have not eaten anything, and you do nothing but shiver and sigh."

Mrs. Hartley was quite convinced in her own mind that Lettice had received an offer of marriage from her cousin Brooke Dalton. Possibly she had already accepted it. She should hear all about it that morning. The symptoms overnight had not been too favorable, but she put down the disturbance which Lettice had shown to an excess of nervous excitement. Women do not all receive a sentence of happiness for life in precisely the same manner, she reflected: some cry and some laugh, some dance and sing, others collapse and are miserable. Lettice was one of the latter kind, and it was for Mrs. Hartley to give her a mother's sympathy and comfort. So she awaited the word which should enable her to cut the dykes of her affection.

Lettice turned white and cold, and her grey eyes were fixed with a stony look on the basket of flowers which decorated the breakfast table.

"I am not well," she said, "but it is worse with the mind than the body. I have done a wicked thing, and to atone for it I am going to do a cruel thing; so how could you expect me to have an appetite?"

"My dear pet!" said Mrs. Hartley, putting out her hand to touch the fingers of her friend, which she found as cold as ice, "you need not tell me that you have done anything wicked, for I don't believe it. And I am sure you would not do anything cruel, knowing beforehand that it was cruel."

"Is it not wicked to tell a lie?—for I have done that."

"No, no!"

"And will it not be cruel to you and to Edith that I should cause pain to your cousin, and make him think me insincere and mercenary?"

"He could not possibly think so," said Mrs. Hartley with decision.

"He must."

"What are you going to do, Lettice?"

"I am going to tell him that I was not honest when I allowed him to say that he would come for my answer in a month, and to think it possible that the answer might be favorable—when God knows that it cannot."

Brooke has asked you to be his wife?"

"Yes."

"And you told him to come for his answer in a month?"

"I agreed to it."

"Well, darling, I think that was very natural—if you could not say 'yes' at once to my cousin."

There was a touch of resentment in the words "my cousin," which Lettice felt. Mrs. Hartley could not understand that Brooke Dalton should have to offer himself twice over—even to her Lettice.

"Wait this month," she went on, "and we shall see what you think at the end of it. You are evidently upset now—taken by surprise, little innocent as you are. The fact is, you have never really recovered from your illness, and I believe you set to work again too soon. A hard-working life would not have suited you; but, thank Heaven, there is an end of that. You will never have to make yourself a slave again!"

"Dear, you do not understand. I did a wicked thing yesterday, and now I must tell Mr. Dalton, and ask him to forgive me."

"Nonsense, child!"

"Ah!" said Lettice, sadly, "it is the first time you have ever spoken sharply to me, and that is part of my punishment!"

Mrs. Hartley sank back in her chair, and looked as though she was about to take refuge in a quiet fit of weeping.

"I can't comprehend it," she said; "I thought we were going to be so happy; and I am sure you and Brooke would suit each other exactly."

"Oh no, indeed; there are thousands of women who will make him a better wife than I could ever have done."

"Now, do listen to me, and give yourself at least a week to think it over, before you say all this to Brooke! That cannot make things worse, either for him or for yourself. Why should you be so rash about it?"

"I wish I could see any other way out of it—but I cannot; and I have been thinking and thinking all the night long. It is a case of conscience with me now."

"You cannot expect me to see it, dear," said Mrs. Hartley, rising from her chair. "It is simply incomprehensible, that you should first agree to wait a month, and then, after a few hours, insist on giving such a pointed refusal. Think, think, my darling!" she went on, laying a caressing hand on Lettice's shoulder. "Suppose that Brooke should feel himself insulted by such treatment. Could you be surprised if he did?"

Lettice buried her face in her hands, mutely despairing. Her punishment was very hard to bear, and the tears which trickled through her fingers showed how much she felt it. With an effort she controlled herself, and looked up again.

"I will tell him all," she said. "He shall be the judge. If he still wishes to renew his question in a month, I will hold myself to that arrangement. I shall claim nothing and refuse nothing; but if he voluntarily withdraws his offer, then, dear, you will see that there could be no alternative."

Mrs. Hartley bent to kiss her.

"I suppose that is all that can be done, Lettice. I am very sorry that my darling is in trouble; but if I could help you, you would tell me more."

Then she left the room, and Lettice went to her desk and wrote her letter.

"DEAR MR. DALTON,—When you asked me yesterday if there was any one to whom I had given my love, I said there was no one. I ought to have thought at the time that this was a question which I could not fairly answer. I am obliged now to confess that my answer was not sincere. You cannot think worse of me than I think of myself; but I should be still more to blame if I allowed the mistake to continue after I have realized how impossible it is for me to give you the answer that you desire. I can only hope that you will forgive me for apparently deceiving you, and believe that I could not have done it if I had not deceived myself. Sincerely yours,

"LETTICE CAMPION."

It was written; and without waiting to criticize her own phrases, she sent it to the Palazzo Serafini by a special messenger.

Brooke Dalton knew that he did not excel in letter writing. He could indite a good, clear, sensible business epistle easily enough; but to express love or sorrow or any of the more subtle emotions on paper would have been impossible to him. Therefore he did not attempt the task. He at once walked over to Mrs. Hartley's villa and asked to see Miss Campion.

He was almost sorry that he had done so when Lettice came down to him in the little shaded *salon* where Mrs. Hartley generally received visitors, and he saw her face. It was white, and her eyes were red with weeping. Evidently that letter had cost her dear, and Brooke Dalton gathered a little courage from the sight.

She came up to him and tried to speak, but the words would not come. Brooke was not a man of very quick intuitions, as a rule; but in this case love gave him sharpness of sight. He took her hand in both his own and held it tenderly while he spoke.

"There is no need for you to say anything," he said; "no need for you to distress yourself in this way. I have only come to say one thing to you, because I felt that I could say it better than I could write it. Of course, I was grieved by your note this morning—terribly grieved and—and—disappointed; but I don't think that it leaves me quite without hope, after all."

"Oh," Lettice was beginning in protest; but he hushed her with a pressure of his hand.

"Listen to me one moment. My last question yesterday was unwarrantable. I never ought to have asked it; and I beg you to consider it and your answer unspoken. Of course, I should be filled with despair if I believed—but I don't believe—I don't conclude anything from the little you have said. I shall still come to you at the end of the month and ask for my answer then."

"It will be of no use," she said, sadly, with averted face and downcast eyes.

"Don't say so. Don't deprive me of every hope. Let me beg of you to say nothing more just now. In a month's time I will come to you, wherever you are, and ask for your *final* decision."

He saw that Lettice was about to speak, and so he went on hastily, "I don't know if I am doing right or wrong in handing you this letter from your brother. He gave it me before I left England, and bade me deliver it or hold it back as I saw fit."

"He knew?" said Lettice, trembling a little as the thought of her brother's general attitude towards her wishes for independence and her friendship for Alan Walcott. "You had told him?"

"Yes, he knew when he wrote it that I meant to ask you to be my wife. I do not know what is in it; but I should imagine from the circumstances that it might convey his good wishes for our joint happiness, if such a thing could ever be! I did not make up my mind to give it to you until I had spoken for myself."

Lettice took the letter and looked at it helplessly, the color flushing high in her cheeks. Dalton saw her embarrassment, and divined that she would not like to open the letter when he was there.

"I am going now," he said. "Edith and I leave Florence this afternoon. We are going to Rome—I shall not go back to England until I have your answer. For the present, good-bye."

Lettice gave him her hand again. He pressed it warmly, and left her without another word. She was fain to acknowledge that he could not have behaved with more delicacy or more generosity. But what should she say to him when the month was at an end?

She sat for some time with Sydney's letter in her lap, wishing it were possible for her to give Brooke Dalton the answer that he desired. But she knew that she could not do it. It was reserved for some other woman to make Brooke Dalton happy. She, probably, could not have done it if she had tried; and she consoled herself by thinking that he would live to see this himself.

Sydney's handwriting on the sealed envelope (she noticed that it was Dalton's seal) caught her eye. What could he have to say to her in his friend's behalf? What was there that might be said or left unsaid at Mr. Dalton's pleasure? She had not much in common with Sydney now-a-days; but she knew that he was just married, and that he loved his wife, and she thought that he might perhaps have only kindly words in store for her—words written perhaps when his heart was soft with a new sort of tenderness. Lettice was hungering for a word of love and sympathy. She opened the letter and read:

"ANGLEFORD, Easter Tuesday.

"MY DEAR LETTICE,

"I am writing this at the close of a short country holiday at Brooke Dalton's place. You know that Brooke has always been a good friend to me, and I owe him a debt of gratitude which I cannot easily repay,

"It would be impossible to express the pleasure with which I heard from him that he had become attached to my only sister, and that he was about to make her an offer of marriage. You would properly resent anything I might say to you in the way of recommendation (and I am sure that he would resent it also), on the ground of his wealth, his excellent worldly position, and his ability to surround his wife with all the luxuries which a woman can desire. I will not suggest any considerations of that kind, but it is only right that I should speak of my friend as I know him. The woman who secures Brooke Dalton for a husband will have the love and care of one of the best men in the world, as well as the consideration of society.

"I look forward, therefore, to a very happy time when you will be settled down in a home of your own, where I can visit you from time to time, and where you will be free from the harass and anxieties of your present existence. My own anxieties of late have been heavy enough, for the wear and tear of Parliamentary life, in addition to the ordinary labors of my profession, are by no means inconsiderable. And I have recently had some worrying cases. In one of these I was called upon to prosecute a man with whom you were at one time unfortunately brought into contact—Walcott by name. He was accused of wounding his wife with intent to do her grievous bodily harm, and it was proved that he almost murdered her by a savage blow with a dagger. There could not be a doubt of his guilt, and he was sentenced (very mercifully) to six months' hard labor. That illustrates the strange vicissitudes of life, for, of course, he is absolutely ruined in the eyes of all right-minded persons.

"Brooke Dalton will probably give you this when you meet, and I shall no doubt hear from you before long. Meanwhile I need not do any more than wish you every possible happiness.

"Believe me, your affectionate brother,

"SYDNEY."

Mrs. Hartley was busy in the next room, arranging and numbering a large collection of pictures which she had bought since she came to Florence, and thinking how very useful they would be at her Sunday afternoon and evening receptions, when she went back to London in October. That was the uppermost thought in her mind when she began her work, but Brooke's visit had excited her curiosity, and she was longing to know whether it would succeed in removing her friend's incomprehensible scruples.

Suddenly she was startled by a cry from the other room. It was like a cry of pain, sharp at the beginning, but stifled immediately. Mrs. Hartley ran to the door and looked in. Lettice, with an open letter in her hand, was lying back in her chair, half unconscious, and as white in the face as the letter itself. A glance showed Mrs. Hartley that this letter was not from Brooke; but her only concern at the moment was for her friend.

Poor Lettice had been stunned by Sydney's blundering missive; and yet it was not altogether Sydney's fault that the statement of facts came upon her with crushing force. It was Mrs. Hartley herself who was mainly responsible for the concealment of what had happened to Alan; and she, no doubt, had done her part with the best intentions. But the result was disastrous so far as her intrigue and wishes were concerned.

With a little care and soothing, Lettice presently recovered from the shock, at any rate sufficiently to stand up and speak.

"Read this," she said faintly to Mrs. Hartley, steadying herself against the table. "Is it true? Is Alan Walcott in prison? Did you know it?"

"Yes, my darling, I knew it!"

"And never told me? When was it?"

Lettice looked at her friend reproachfully, yet without a trace of anger.

"My dearest Lettice, would it have been wise for me to tell you at the time—the trial was in April—when you were still dangerously weak and excitable? It was not as if I had known that it would be—what shall I say?—a matter of such great concern to you. Remember that we had never mentioned his name since we left England, and I could not assume that the old friendly interest in him survived."

"I do not blame you, dear," said Lettice faintly. "I do not blame Sydney—unless it is for prosecuting him. I cannot think or reason about it—I can only feel; and I suppose that what I feel amounts to my own condemnation."

"Don't talk of condemnation! Your kind heart makes you loyal to everyone whom you have called a friend—and what can be more natural? I was terribly grieved for the unfortunate man when I heard of the trouble he had brought on himself. But we cannot bear each other's sorrows in this world. Each one must reap as he has sown."

"And do you think that Alan has sown what he is reaping? Do you believe that he stabbed his wife?"

"My dear, I must believe it. Everyone believes it."

"Alan!" said Lettice, half raising her hand, and gazing out through the open window, over the banks of the yellow-flowing Arno, with a look of ineffable trust and tenderness in her face, "Alan, did you try to kill the woman who has cursed and degraded you? Did you strike her once in return for her thousand malicious blows? Did you so much as wish her ill to gratify your anger and revenge? No!—there is one, at least, who does not believe you guilty of this crime!"

"Lettice, darling!"

"I hear no voice but that of Alan, calling to me from his prison cell." She sprang to her feet and stood as if listening to a far-off call.

"Lettice, for Heaven's sake, do not give way to delusions. Think of those who love you best, who will be in despair if ill should befall you."

"Yes, I will think of those who love me best! I must go to him. Dear Mrs. Hartley, I am not losing my senses, but the feeling is so strong upon me that I have no power to resist it. I must go to Alan."

"My child, consider! You cannot go to him. He is in prison."

"I will go and live at the gates until he comes out."

"You must not talk like this. I cannot let you go—you, a woman! What would the world think of you?"

"What does the world think of him? It says he is guilty—when I know that he is not!"

"You cannot know, Lettice. All that was proved against him is that in some way or other, goaded by her reproaches, he stabbed her with his dagger. But that was proved, and you cannot get over it. I can quite believe that he is more unfortunate than maliciously guilty; yet, surely, you must admit that he is ruined."

"Never!" said Lettice, passionately. She could almost have stamped her foot with rage to hear another say what was already in her own mind. But old habits of self-restraint came to her aid. She raised her head proudly as she replied: "A man is never ruined. Alan Walcott has a future."

"He may have a future, dear, but it is one in which we cannot be concerned. Listen to me, Lettice—I do so strongly feel that this is the crisis and turning point of your life! There are lines beyond which no woman who respects herself, or who would be respected by the world, can go. If you do not act with prudence and common sense to-day, you may have to repent it all the rest of your life. You are strong—use your strength to good purpose, and think, for Heaven's sake think, of the courage and self-sacrifice which are expected from women of your breeding and position." She ended with tears in her eyes, for although she spoke conventionally, and as conventional women speak, her heart was full of the truest anxiety and tenderness for her friend.

Lettice was looking out of the window again, as though for inspiration in her difficulty. When she answered, it was with inexpressible sadness and regret.

"You have been so good and kind to me that it cuts my heart to disagree with you in any way. Have I reached such a turning point as you say? Perhaps it is so—but I have been brought to it; I have not wilfully walked up to it. You said that Alan's future was one in which we could not be concerned. What I feel at this moment, more vividly than I ever felt anything in my life, is that I am concerned and involved in his future. I have fought against this, and put it aside, as you, my dear friend, must know. I have tried to forget him—and my shame of the past few weeks has been that I tried to care for some one else. Well, I failed; and see how the very trying has brought me to this clear and irresistible knowledge of my own heart! If I were superstitious, I should say that it was my fate. I don't know what it is—I don't know if my view or your view of my duty is right—but I am quite sure of this, that I shall have to act on my own view. Courage and self-sacrifice—yes! They are primary virtues in a woman; but courage for what? Self-sacrifice for whom?"

"For society! For the world in general!"

"But the world in general has the world to help it. If one man needs a woman's sacrifice, he has only one woman to look to. I am very, very sorry that I cannot go my own way without giving you pain, and if only I could think that by any act which it is in my power to do——"

"I don't know what you mean by going your own way, child; but I hope you will come to a better mind before you take a decided step." Mrs. Hartley was growing thoroughly alarmed.

"Indeed, I have come to the best, the only possible resolution; and the question is, how soon I can be in London. We have been in Italy a long time, have we not?"

"Eleven months."

"Do you wish to stay much longer?"

"I see very plainly, Lettice, that, if I did want to stay, it would end in my being here alone. But I shall not let you travel by yourself. If your interest in Italy has gone, so has mine. We will start on Saturday."

Mrs. Hartley was sorely disappointed, and even angry with Lettice; but she thought that at any rate she ought not to part with her until they were back again in London. And there was at least a hope that she would be more prudent a week hence than she was to-day.

As for Lettice, she found it very hard to wait. If she had been alone she would have left Florence within an hour of reading Sydney's letter, for her heart was on fire with impatience.

She did not speak to Brooke Dalton again, except in the presence of her friends; but after he and Edith had gone she wrote him another letter to the address which he had given them. In this letter she begged him, as kindly as she could, to consider her last answer as final. "Sydney's note," she said, "has only strengthened my decision. Indeed, it has made me ten times more decided. My heart is not mine to give. You will not expect that I should say more than this. The best thing I can hope from you is that you will judge me charitably, and that if others reproach me you will not join in the chorus."

Poor Brooke Dalton kissed the letter quietly, and said nothing about it; nor did he openly give utterance to the words which entered his mind in reference to Sydney's intervention. Mrs. Hartley silently resolved to see Sydney Campion as soon as she got back to London, and beg him to reason with Lettice, and, if possible, bring her to a better mind. But she was disappointed to find that Sydney was not in town. His marriage had taken place in September and he had gone to Scotland with his wife. She knew that he was on fairly good terms with Lettice, and had pressed her to be present at the wedding, also that Miss Pynsent had sent a very charming and affectionate letter to her future sister-in-law. But whether Lettice had written to him and told him of her intentions and opinions, Mrs. Hartley did not know.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AMBITION AT THE HELM.

Sydney Campion and Anna Pynsent were married early in September, while Lettice was still in Italy. There had been a death in the Pynsent family since the death of Sydney's mother, and Nan was not sorry to make this a pretext for arranging every thing in the simplest possible manner. She had no bridesmaids, and did without a wedding-feast; and, strange to say, Sydney was perfectly well content.

For it might have been expected that Sydney—with whom the roots of worldliness and selfishness had struck very deep—would desire a wedding that would make a noise in the world, and would not be satisfied with a bride in a severely simple white dress and a complete absence of all display. But it seemed as if all that was good in his character had been brought to the surface by a marriage which his club-friends chuckled over as so absolutely unexceptionable from a worldly point of view. For almost the first time in his life he was a little ashamed of his worldliness. His marriage with Nan Pynsent was making—or so he thought—everything easy for him! His selfishness was pampered by the girl's adoring love, by her generosity, even by her beauty and her wealth; and it recoiled upon itself in an utterly unexpected way. Finding life no longer a battle, Sydney became suddenly ashamed of some of his past methods of warfare; and, looking at his betrothed, could only breathe a silent and fervent aspiration that she might never know the story of certain portions of his life.

He was thoroughly in love with his wife; and—what was more important in a man of his temperament—he admired as well as loved her. Her personal charm was delightful to him, and the high-bred quietness of her manner, the refinement of her accent, the aroma of dignity and respect which surrounded the Pynsent household in general, were elements of his feeling for her as strong as his sense of her grace and beauty. With his high respect for position and good birth, it would have been almost impossible for him to yield his heart for long to a woman in a lower grade of society than his own; even a woman who might be considered his equal was not often attractive to him; he preferred one—other considerations apart—who was socially a little his superior, and could make a link for him with the great families of England. Had Nan been the pretty governess whom he thought her at first, not all her charm, her talent and her originality of character, would have prevailed to make him marry her.

But in spite of these defects, when once his judgment had assented, he gave free rein to his heart. Nan satisfied his taste and his intellect, to begin with; his senses were equally well content with her beauty; and then—then—another kind of emotion came into play. He was a little vexed and impatient with himself at first, to find the difference that she made in his life. She interested him profoundly, and he had never been profoundly interested in any woman before. Her earnestness charmed while it half-repelled him. And her refinement, her delicacy of feeling, her high standard of morality, perpetually astonished him. He remembered that he had heard his sister Lettice talk as Nan sometimes talked. With Lettice he had pooh-poohed her exalted ideas and thought them womanish; in Nan, he was inclined to call them beautiful. Of course, he said to himself, her ideas did not affect him; men could not guide their lives by a woman's standard; nevertheless, her notions were pretty, although puritanical; and he had no desire to see them changed. He would not have Nan less conscientious for the world.

An appeal to Sydney's self-love had always been a direct appeal to his heart. It was sometimes said of him that he cared for others chiefly in proportion as they conferred benefits and advantages upon himself; but he was certainly capable of warm affection when it had been called into existence. He began to display a very real and strong affection for Nan. She had found the way to his heart—though she little suspected it—through his very weaknesses: she had conquered the man she loved by means of his selfishness. The worldly advantages she conferred took his nature by storm. It was not a high-minded way of contracting an engagement for life; but, as a fragrant flower may easily grow upon a very unpleasant dunghill, so the sweet flower of a true, pure love began to flourish on the heap of refuse with which the good in Sydney's nature had been overlaid.

Sydney was treated with considerable generosity by Nan's guardian and trustees. Her fortune was of course to remain largely at her own disposal; but an ambitious man like Sydney Campion was certain to profit by it in some degree. Sir John Pynsent had always known that he was not likely to possess the management of it for long, and the next best thing was that it should be utilized for a member of the Conservative party, one of his own special connection, whose future career he should be able to watch over and promote. Campion must clearly understand that he owed his position and prospects to the Pynsents. He was apt to be somewhat off-hand and independent, but he would improve with a little judicious coaching. A man cannot be independent who owes his seat to the Oligarchy, his introduction in Parliament to individual favor, and his private fortune to the daughter of a house which had always been devoted to the interests of a particular party. This was Campion's position, and Sir John felt that his brother-in-law would soon fall into line.

Sydney was made the proprietor of the London house in which they were to live—the house at Vanebury was let for the present; but the whole of the domestic charges were to be borne by his wife. His professional income would be at his own disposal; and by special arrangement the sum of twenty thousand pounds was set apart as a fund to be drawn upon from time to time, by their joint consent, for the advancement of his purely political interests, in such a manner as might be deemed most expedient.

This was a better arrangement than Sydney had allowed himself to anticipate, and he was naturally elated by his success. He was so grateful to Nan for the good things she had brought him that he studied her tastes and consulted her inclinations in a way quite new to him. No doubt there was selfishness even in the repression of self which this compliance with her habits imposed upon him; but the daily repression was a gain to him.

And Nan recompensed his considerate behavior by giving him that incense of love and esteem and intellectual deference which is desired by every man; and by convincing him that his ambitions—as she knew them—had in her the most complete sympathy, and the most valuable aid. This she did for him, and satisfied all the wishes of his heart.

They had a delightful honeymoon in the Tyrol, and returned to town late in October. The house in Thurloe Square, where they were to reside, had been newly decorated and furnished for them, and was pronounced by critics to be a marvel of luxury and beauty. Sydney, though he did not pretend to be well acquainted with æsthetic fashions, recognized that the rooms had an attractive appearance, and set off Nan's beauty to the best advantage. He fell easily and naturally into the position which his good fortune had marked out for him, and thought, in spite of certain bitter drops, in spite of a touch of gall in the honey, and a suspected thorn on the rose, in spite of a cloud no bigger than a man's hand in an otherwise clear sky, that Fate had on the whole been very kind to him.

Nan's first appearance as a bride was at her brother's house. Lady Pynsent's whole soul was wrapped up in the art and mystery of entertaining, and she hailed this opportunity of welcoming the Campions into her "set" with unfeigned joy. Her gifts as a hostess had been her chief recommendation in Sir John's eyes when he married her; he would never have ventured to espouse a woman who could not play her part in the drawing-room as well as he could play his part in the club.

A few days after the Campions' arrival in town, therefore, the Pynsents gave a dinner at their own house, to which Lady Pynsent had invited a number of men, Sydney Campion amongst the number, whom Sir John desired to assemble together. The Benedicts came with their wives, and Nan made her first entry into the charmed circle of matrons, where Sydney hoped that she would one day lead and rule.

Sir John had an object in gathering these half-dozen congenial spirits round his table. He always had, or invented, an object for his acts, whatever they might be; a dinner party at home would have bored him grievously if he could not have invested it with a distinct political purpose. And, indeed, it was this power of throwing fine dust in his own eyes which first made his party regard him as an important social factor, worthy of being taken seriously at his own valuation. The spirit of the age was just as strong in him, though in a somewhat different sense, as it was in Lord Montagu Plumley, one of his guests on the present occasion, who had shot up like a meteor from the comparative obscurity of cadetship in a ducal family to the front rank of the Tory pretenders, mainly by ticketing his own valuation on his breast, and keeping himself perpetually front foremost to the world. The fault was not so much Lord Montagu's as that of the age in which he lived. He had merit, and he felt his strength, precisely as Sir John felt his strength as a social pioneer, but in a generation of talented mediocrities he had no chance of making his merit known by simply doing his duty. At any rate, he had given up the attempt in despair, and on a memorable evening, of which the history shall one day be written full and fair, he had expounded to a select group of his intimate friends his great theory on the saving of the Commonwealth, and his method of obtaining the sceptre of authority, which implied the dispensation of honors to all who believed in him.

A very good fellow in his way was Montagu Plumley, and Sir John was anxious that Sydney Campion, now a connection as well as a friend, should be brought within the influence of one whom the baronet had always regarded as the Young Man of the future. Sydney had been wont to sneer a little, after his fashion, at the individuals who interpreted the new ideas, though he accepted the ideas themselves as irrefragable. The nation must be saved by its young men—yes, certainly. As a young man he saw that plainly enough, but it was not going to be saved by any young man who could be named in his presence. He had said something like this to Sir John Pynsent, not many days before his marriage, and Sir John, who had taken Sydney's measure to a nicety, had resolved that his promising brother-in-law should be converted at the earliest possible opportunity into a faithful follower and henchman of Lord Montagu Plumley.

Another old friend of the reader was amongst the guests who sat over their wine round Sir John's hospitable board. This was the Honorable Tom Willoughby, whom his host had initiated at the Oligarchy into the art of fishing for men in the troubled waters of Liberalism. Tom Willoughby was, and always would be, a light weight in the political arena, but he was very useful when put to work that he could do. He was the spoiled child of Sir John Pynsent, and was fast earning a character as the chartered libertine of the House of Commons, where his unfailing good humor made him friends on both sides. Sir John told him one day that he was cut out to be an envoy extraordinary from the Conservative to the Liberal ranks, whereupon the Honorable Tom had answered that he did not mind discharging the function for his party to-day if he could see his way to doing the same thing for his country hereafter. Whereat Sir John laughed, and told him that if he wanted a mission of that kind he must bow down to the rising sun; and it was then that he asked his friend to come and dine with Lord Montagu.

Gradually, after the ladies had gone, the conversation shifted round to politics, and Sir John began to draw his guests out. People had been talking a good deal during the last few days about the resignation of Mr. Bright, which, coming in the same session with that of Mr. Forster, had made something of a sensation.

"How long will you give them now, Lord Montagu?" said the baronet. "Two of their strongest men are gone—one over Ireland and the other over Egypt. If the country could vote at this moment, I verily believe that we should get a majority. It almost makes one wish for annual Parliaments."

"I have more than once thought, Sir John, that the Tories would have had a much longer aggregate of power in the past fifty years if there had been a general election every year. When we come into office we make things perfectly pleasant all round for the first twelve month. When they come in, it rarely takes them a year to set their friends at loggerheads. As it is, they will stick in to the last moment—certainly until they have passed a Franchise Act."

"I suppose so. We must not go to the country on the Franchise."

"Rather not."

"And it will be too late to rely on Egypt."

"Heaven only knows what they are yet capable of in Egypt. But we shall have something stronger than that to go upon—as you know very well."

"Ireland," said Campion.

"Not exactly Ireland, though the seed may spring up on Irish soil. The main thing to do, the thing that every patriotic man ought to work for, is to break down the present One Old Man system of government in this country. The bane of Great Britain is that we are such hero-worshippers by nature that we can only believe in one man at a time. We get hold of a Palmerston or a Gladstone, and set him on a pedestal, and think that everybody else is a pygmy. It may be that our idol is a tolerably good one—that is, not mischievously active. In that case he cannot do much harm. But when, as in the case of Gladstone, you have a national idol who is actively mischievous, it is impossible to exaggerate the evil which may be done. Therefore the object which we should all pursue in the first instance is to throw off the old man of the sea, and not merely to get the better of him in parliament, but to cover him with so much discredit that he cannot wheedle another majority from the country. It does not signify whether we do this through Irish or Egyptian affairs, so long as we do it. Mr. Campion has shown us how seats are to be won. We want fifty or sixty men at least to do the same thing for us at the next election."

"There is no doubt," said Campion, that with the present electorate we might safely go to the poll at once. Liberalism, minus Bright, Forster, and Goschen, and plus Alexandria and Phœnix Park, is no longer what it was in 1880. I had the most distinct evidence of that at Vanebury."

"There was a considerable turnover of votes, I suppose?"

"Unquestionably, and amongst all classes."

"Yes, that is encouraging, so far. But in view of the new franchise, it does not go nearly far enough. The idol must be overthrown."

"Who is to do it?" Sydney asked.

"That is hardly for me to say. But it will be done."

"The idol is doing it very fairly," said Willoughby, "on his own account, especially in London. Wherever I go his popularity is decidedly on the wane amongst his old supporters."

"Let that go on for a year or two," said Lord Montagu, "and then, when the inevitable compact is made with Parnell, the great party which has had its own way in England for so many years, at any rate up to 1874, will crumble to pieces."

The talk was commonplace as beseemed the occasion; but Sir John's object in bringing his men together was practically gained. Before the evening was over, Lord Montagu was favorably impressed by Campion's ability and shrewdness, whilst Sydney was more disposed from that time to regard Plumley as one of the most likely aspirants for the leadership of his party.

In the drawing-room, Nan had made herself as popular as her husband was making himself in the dining-room. She was greatly improved by her marriage, many of the matrons thought; she was more dignified and far less abrupt than she used to be. She had always been considered pretty, and her manners were gaining the finish that they had once perhaps lacked; in fact, she had found out that Sydney set a high value on social distinction and prestige; and, resolving to please him in this as in everything else, she had set herself of late to soften down any girlish harshness or brusquerie, such as Lady Pynsent used sometimes to complain of in her, and to develop the gracious softness of manner which Sydney liked to see.

"She will be quite the *grande dame*, by and by," said one lady, watching her that night. "She has some very stately airs already, and yet she is absolutely without affectation. Mr. Campion is a very lucky man."

Nan was asked to play; but, although she acknowledged that she still kept up her practising, she had not brought her violin with her. She was half afraid, moreover, that Sydney did not like her to perform. She fancied that he had an objection to any sort of display of either learning or accomplishment on a woman's part; she had gathered this impression from the way in which he spoke of his sister Lettice. And she did not want to expose herself to the same sort of criticism.

One of the younger ladies at Lady Pynsent's that night was a Mrs. Westray, wife of the eminently respectable member for Bloomsbury, who, as a city merchant of great wealth and influence, was one of the invited guests. Mrs. Westray was by way of being a literary lady, having printed a volume of her "Travels." Unfortunately she had only traveled in France, over well-worn tracks, and her book appeared just after those of two other ladies, with whom the critics had dealt very kindly indeed; so that the last comer had not been treated quite so well as she deserved. Nevertheless she keenly enjoyed her reputation as a woman of letters; and having found on inquiry that Sydney Campion was the brother of the lady whose novel had gained such a brilliant success in the spring, she asked her husband to bring him to her.

"Oh, why does Miss Campion live out of England?" Mrs. Westray asked him, after gushing a little about his sister's "exquisite romance". "Surely she does not mean to do so always?"

"No," said Sydney. "I hope not. She was rather seriously ill last Christmas, and we thought it best for her to live in Italy until she quite recovered. I trust that we shall have her back again before the end of the year." He was as yet unacquainted with the history of his sister's movements.

"I am so glad to hear it. I want very much to make her acquaintance."

"We hope that my sister will come to stay with us for a time," said Sydney, "and in that case you will be sure to see her."

"That will be so very nice," said the lady; "I am quite certain I shall like her immensely."

Sydney felt a little doubtful whether Lettice would like Mrs. Westray; and he also doubted whether his wife and his sister would be found to have much in common. But he was more or less consciously building on the hope that Dalton's suit would prosper, and that Lettice would settle down quietly as the mistress of Angleford Manor, and so be weaned from the somewhat equivocal situation of a successful author. It did not so much as enter his mind, by the way, that there was anything equivocal in Mrs. Westray's authorship. Her book had failed, and her husband was very wealthy, so that she could not be suspected of having earned money by her pen. But Lettice had cheques for *her* romances!

The dinner was very successful, and the Pynsents were charmed with the result. "It is a most suitable union," said Sir John, alluding to Nan's marriage to Sydney Campion, and hoping to crush his wife a little, seeing that she had objected to it: "it does great credit to my discernment in bringing them together. I always knew that Campion would get on. Lord Montagu was very much pleased with him."

"Nan looked lovely," said Lady Pynsent, ignoring her husband's innuendo. "She tells me that Sydney is very particular about her dress, and she seems perfectly happy."

Meanwhile, as Sydney and his wife were driving home, Nan nestled up to him and said coaxingly,

"Now tell me, dear, just what you were thinking of to-night."

"I was thinking that my wife was the most beautiful woman in the room."

"Oh, I did not mean anything of that kind. When you were talking at dinner-time, and after we had gone up stairs, what was really the uppermost thought in your mind?"

"Well," said Sydney laughing, "you deserve all my candor, Nan. I was thinking, if you must know, that I could meet any one of those men in debate, or in council, and hold my own against him. There's vanity for you! Now it is your turn."

"Mine?" she said. "Why, it was just the same as your own. That you were as wise and great as any of them——"

"Ah, I didn't say that."

"—And that when you are a Minister of State, and I throw open my drawing-room, we will challenge comparison with any other house in London. Do you like the idea?"

He put his arm round her and kissed her very fondly. She had assimilated his ambitions to a remarkable degree, and he was as surprised as he was delighted to find her almost as eager for his success as he himself could be. The two were by no means destitute of that community of interests and pursuits which has been said to constitute the best hope of wedded bliss. But Nan's hopes were less material than Sydney's. It was as yet a doubtful matter whether he would draw her down from her high standard, or whether she would succeed in raising him to hers. At present, satisfied with themselves and with each other, they were a thoroughly happy couple.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AT MRS. CHIGWIN'S COTTAGE.

BIRCHMEAD in the summer and autumn is a very different place from the Birchmead which Alan Walcott saw when he came down to visit his aunt in the early days of February. Then the year had not begun to move; at most there was a crocus or a snowdrop in the sheltered corners of Mrs. Chigwin's garden; and, if it had not been for a wealth of holly round the borders of the village green, the whole place would have been destitute of color.

But, in the summer, all is color and brightness. The blue sky, the emerald lawns, the dull red earth, the many-hued masses of foliage, from the dark copper beech to the light greys of the limes and poplars, mingle their broad effects upon their outspread canvas of Nature, and in the foreground a thousand flowers glow warmly from the well-kept gardens or the fertile meadow-side. Nowhere do the old-fashioned flowers of the field and garden seem to flourish more luxuriantly than at Birchmead, or come to fuller bloom, or linger for a longer season. Here, as elsewhere in the south of England, June and July are the richest months for profusion and color; but the two months that follow July may be made, with very little trouble, as gay and varied in their garden-show, if not so fragrant and exquisite. The glory of the roses and lilies has departed, but in their place is much to compensate all simple and unsophisticated lovers of their mother-earth.

In the second week of October, Mrs. Chigwin was at work in her garden, with her dress tucked up, a basket in her left hand, and a large pair of scissors in her right. Every flower that had begun to fade, every withered leaf and overgrown shoot fell before those fatal shears, and was caught in the all-devouring basket; and from time to time she bore a fresh load of snippets to their last resting-place. Her heart was in her work, and she would not rest until she had completed her round. From the clematis on the cottage wall and the jessamine over the porch she passed to a clump of variegated hollyhocks, and from them to the hedge of sweet peas, to the fuchsias almost as high as the peas, the purple and white phlox, the yellow evening primrose, and the many-colored asters. Stooping here and there, she carefully trimmed the rank-growing geraniums and the clusters of chrysanthemums, cut off the straggling branches of the mignonette and removed every passing bloom of harebell, heartsease, and heliotrope.

The euthanasia of the fading blossoms filled her shallow skep half-a-dozen times over, and, to anyone ignorant (to his shame) of the art which our first ancestor surely learned from his mother, and loved, it might have seemed that Mrs. Chigwin used her scissors with a too unsparing hand. But the happy old soul knew what she was about. The evening was closing in, and she had cut both the flowers whose beauty had passed away and those which would have been wrinkled and flabby before the morning, knowing full well that only so can you reckon on the perfection of beauty from day to day.

"There, now," she said, when her last basketful was disposed of, "I have done. And if old Squire Jermyn, who first laid out this garden, was to come to life again to-morrow, there would be nothing in Martha Chigwin's little plot to make his hair stand on end."

She threw her eyes comprehensively round the ring of cottages which encircled the village green, with a sniff of defiant challenge, as though she would dare any of her neighbors to make the same boast; and then she came and sat down on the garden-seat, and said to her old friend and companion,

"What do you think about it, Elizabeth?"

"You are right, Martha; right as you always are," said Mrs. Bundlecombe, in a feeble voice. "And I was thinking as you went round, cutting off the flowers that have had their day, that if you had come to me and cut me off with the rest of them, there would have been one less poor old withered thing in the world. Here have I been a wretched cripple on your hands all the summer, and surely if the Lord had had any need for me He would not have broken my stalk and left me to shrivel up in the sunshine."

"Now, Bessy," said Mrs. Chigwin, severely, "do you want to put out the light of peace that we have been enjoying for days past? Fie, for shame! and in a garden, too. Where's your gratitude—or, leastways, where's your patience?"

"There, there, Martha, you know I did not mean it. But I sit here thinking and thinking, till I could write whole volumes on the vanity of human wishes. Cut me off, indeed, just at this moment, when I am waiting to see my dear boy once more before I die!"

Mrs. Bundlecombe was silent again, and the other did not disturb her, knowing by experience what the effort to speak would be likely to end in.

Things had not gone well at Birchmead in the last six months. The news of Alan's arrest on the charge of wife-murder—that was the exaggerated shape in which it first reached the village—was a terrible blow to poor Aunt Bessy. She was struck down by paralysis, and had to keep to her bed for many weeks, and even now she had only the partial use of her limbs. Mrs. Chigwin, buckling to her new task with heroic cheerfulness, had nursed and comforted her, and lightened the burden of her life so far as that was possible. As soon as the cripple could be dressed and moved about, she had bought for her a light basket-chair, into which she used to lift her bodily. Whenever the weather was fine enough she would wheel her into the garden; and she won the first apology for a laugh from Mrs. Bundlecombe when, having drawn her on the grass and settled her comfortably, she said,

"Now, Bessy, I have repotted you and put you in the sun on the same day as my balsams, and I shall expect you to be ready for planting out as soon as they are."

But that was too sanguine a hope, for Mrs. Bundlecombe was still in her chair, and there was not much chance of her ever being able to walk again. As it had been impossible for her to go and see her nephew, either before his trial or since, Mrs. Chigwin had written a letter for her, entreating Alan to come to Birchmead as soon as he was free; and the writer assured him on her own account that there was not a better place in England for quiet rest and consolation. They heard from the prison authorities that the letter had been received, and that it would be given to the prisoner; and now Aunt Bessy was counting the days until his time had expired.

There had been other changes at Birchmead in the course of the year. Mrs. Harrington no longer occupied the adjoining cottage, but lay at peace in the churchyard at Thorley. Her grand-daughter had written once to the old ladies from London, according to her promise; after which they had heard of her no more, although they sent her word of her grandmother's death, to the address which she had given them.

The sun was sinking low in the sky, and it was time for Mrs. Bundlecombe to be taken indoors. So Martha Chigwin wheeled her into the house, rapidly undressed her, and lifted her into bed. Then there was a chapter to be read aloud, and joint prayers to be repeated, and supper to be prepared; and Mrs. Chigwin had just made the two cups of gruel which represented the last duty of her busy day's routine, when she heard a noise of wheels on the gravel outside.

It was not a cart but a cab, and it stopped at the door. Cabs were not very familiar in Birchmead, and the appearance of this one at Mrs. Chigwin's cottage brought curious eyes to almost every window looking out upon the green.

There was not much to reward curiosity—only a lady, dressed in a long fur-lined cloak, with a quiet little bonnet, and a traveling-bag in her hand, who knocked at Mrs. Chigwin's door, and, after a short confabulation, dismissed the cabman and went in. At any rate it was something for Birchmead to know that it had a visitor who had come in a Dorminster cab. That was an incident which for these good souls distinguished the day from the one which went before and the one which came after it.

It was Lettice Campion who thus stirred the languid pulse of Birchmead. She had found her way like a ministering angel to the bedside of Alan's aunt, within three or four days of her arrival in England.

Mrs. Chigwin felt the utmost confidence in her visitor, both from what she had heard of her before and from what she saw of her as soon as she entered the cottage. Lettice could not have been kinder to her mother than she was to the poor crippled woman who had no claim upon her service. She told Mrs. Chigwin that so long as she was at Birchmead she should be Mrs. Bundlecombe's nurse, and she evidently meant to keep her word. Aunt Bessy was comforted beyond measure by her appearance, and still more by the few words which Lettice whispered to her, in response to the forlorn appeal of the old woman's eyes—so unutterably eloquent of the thoughts that were throbbing in the hearts of both—

"I shall wait for him when he comes out!"

"God bless you!" said Aunt Bessy.

"The world has been cruel to him. He has only us two; we must try to comfort him," whispered Lettice.

"I am past it, dearie. He has no one but you. You are enough for him."

And she went on in the slow and painful way which had become habitual to her.

"I have been tortured in my heart, thinking of his coming out upon the weary world, all alone, broken down may be, with none to take him by the hand, and me lying here upon my back, unable to help him. Oh, it is hard! And sometimes in a dream I see his mother, Lucy, my own little sister that died so many years ago, floating over the walls of his prison, and signing to me to fetch him out. But now she will rest in her grave, and I myself could die to-night and be happy, because you will not forsake him. My dear, he loves you like his own soul!"

Lettice did not reply, but she kissed the cheek of Alan's aunt, and bade her try to sleep.

It was growing dark. Through the window she could trace the outlines of the garden below. She was tempted by the balmy night, and went out.

"He loves you like his own soul!" Was not that how she loved him, and was she not here in England to tell him so?

The question startled her, as though some one else had put it to her, and was waiting for an answer. That, surely, was not her object; and yet, if not, what was? From the hour when she read Sydney's letter at Florence she seemed to have had a new motive power within her. She had acted hitherto from instinct, or from mere feeling; she could scarcely recall a single argument which she had held with herself during the past ten days. She might have been walking in a dream, so little did she seem to have used her reason or her will. Yet much had happened since she left Italy.

On Thursday she had arrived in London with Mrs. Hartley.

On Saturday she went out by herself, and managed to see the governor of the gaol where Alan was lodged. From him she learned, to her dismay, that "Number 79" had had a severe and almost fatal illness. He was still very weak, though out of danger, and it was thought that with the careful attention which he was receiving in the infirmary he would probably be able to leave on the 29th of October.

Captain Haynes told her that his prisoner appeared to have no relatives "except the wife, who was not likely to give herself much trouble about him, and an aunt in the country who was paralyzed." So, Lettice arranged to bring a carriage to the prison gates on the morning of the 29th, and to fetch him away.

Having learned Mrs. Bundlecombe's address, thanks to the letter which had been written to the governor by Mrs. Chigwin, she came to Birchmead on Monday—lingering an hour or two at Angleford in order that she might see her native place again, and recall the image of the father whom she had loved and lost.

Now, at length, her heart was in a measure contented and at rest. Now she could think, and reason with herself if need be. What did she mean to do? What had she done already? How had she committed herself? She was only too painfully aware that she had taken a step which there was no retracing. Had she not virtually broken with Mrs. Hartley, with the Daltons, with Sydney and his wife? They would doubtless think so, whether she did or not. She had no illusions in the matter. Not one of them would forgive her—not even Mrs. Hartley—for her treatment of Brooke Dalton, for her independent action since she left Italy, and for her association with Alan Walcott.

As for that—it was true that she had not yet gone too far. She had not coupled her name with Alan's in any public manner, or in any way at all, except that she had used her own name when calling on Captain Haynes. He would not talk, and, therefore, it was not too late to act with greater secrecy and caution. She need not let anyone know that she had taken an interest in him, that she had been to his prison, and had promised to bring him away when he was released, Beyond that point of bringing him away she had not yet advanced, even in her own mind. What was to prevent her from sending a carriage, as though it had been provided by Aunt Bessy, and letting him find his way to Birchmead, or wherever he wished to go, like any other discharged prisoner. Then she would not shock her friends—she would not outrage the feelings of poor Sydney, who thought so much of the world's opinion and of the name they held in common.

That was a strong argument with her, for, to some extent, she sympathized with her brother's ambitions, although she did not greatly esteem them. She would do all that she could to avoid hurting him. How much could she do? Was it possible for her now, when she was calm and collected, to form a strong resolution and draw a clear line beyond which she would not let her pity for Alan Walcott carry her? What she thought right, that she would do—no more, but certainly no less. Then what was right?

There was the difficulty. Within the limits of a good conscience, she had been guided almost entirely by her feelings, and they had led her so straight that she had never been prompted to ask herself such questions as What is right? or What is the proper thing to do? She had done good by intuition and nature; and now it was out of her power to realize any other or stronger obligation than that of acting as nature bade her. One thing only was plain to her at the moment—that she must be kind to this man who had been persecuted, betrayed, and unjustly punished, and who, but for her, would be absolutely alone in the world. Could she be kind without going to meet him at the prison gates?

She was trying to persuade herself that she could; and so deeply was she absorbed by the struggle which was going on in her mind that she did not notice the feeble wailing sound which ever and anon came towards her on the silent night air. But, at last, a louder cry than before disturbed her quiet reverie, and startled her into attention.

It seemed to be close at hand—a cry like that of a little child; and she stood up and peered into the shadow behind her. She could see nothing, but the wailing came again, and Lettice groped her way across the flower border, and stood by the low garden wall.

There was just enough light to enable her to distinguish the form of a woman, crouching on the rank grass in what used to be Mrs. Harrington's garden, and vainly attempting to soothe the baby which she held in her arms.

It was too dark to see the woman's features, or to judge if she were in much distress, but Lettice could not be satisfied to leave her where she was.

"Who are you?" she asked; and, at the sound of her voice the little child was hushed, as though it knew that a friend was near. But the mother did not answer.

"What do you want? Why are you sitting there? Have you no home?"

A very weak "No" reached her straining ears.

"Can you walk? Come here, if you can."

The figure did not move.

"Then I must get over the wall and come to you."

She was beginning to do as she had said, when the other slowly rose to her feet, and drew unwillingly a step nearer.

"Come," said Lettice, kindly, but firmly. She felt that this was a woman over whom it would not be hard to exercise authority.

Gradually the mother approached, with her baby in her arms, until she was within half-a-dozen yards of the wall. Then she leaned against the trunk of an old apple-tree, and would not come any further.

"Are you ill?" said Lettice, gently.

Again the half-heard "No," but this time accompanied by a sob.

"Then why are you out at this time, and with your poor little baby, too? Have you walked far to-day?"

"From Thorley."

"Do you live at Thorley?"

"Not now."

"Where do you come from?"

"London."

"Let me see your baby. Is it hungry, or cold? Why do you keep so far away from me? and why are you crying? Oh, Milly, Milly! Is it you? Dear child, come to me!"

Then the girl came from amongst the branches of the tree, and tottered to the wall, and laid her child in the arms stretched out to receive it.

"Why did you not come to the door, Milly, instead of waiting out here? You might have been sure of a welcome!"

She laid her hand on the head which was bowed down upon the wall, and which shook with the poor girl's sobs. Her bonnet had fallen off, and hung on her back; and Lettice noticed that the long hair of which the girl used to be so proud was gone.

"I did not come to the village till it was dark," Milly said, as soon as she could speak. "Then I should have knocked, but I saw you looking out at the window—and I was ashamed!"

"Ashamed?" said Lettice, in a low voice. There was one thing, she thought, of which Milly could be ashamed. She looked from the weeping mother to the baby's face, and back again to Milly. "My poor girl," she said, with a sudden rush of tender feeling for the woman who had perhaps been tempted beyond her strength—so Lettice thought—"my poor child, you don't think *I* should be unkind to you!"

"No, no! you were always so kind to me, miss. And I—I—was so wicked—so ungrateful—so deceitful——"

And with that she broke down utterly. Lettice's arms were round her neck, and the young mother, feeling herself in the presence of a comforter at last, let loose her pent-up misery and sobbed aloud.

"Where is—he? your husband?" said Lettice, remembering that she had heard of Milly's marriage from Mrs.

Bundlecombe some time ago, and conjecturing that something had gone wrong, but not yet guessing the whole truth.

Milly sobbed on for a minute or two without replying. Then she said, somewhat indistinctly,

"He's gone away. Left me."

"Left you? But—for a time, you mean? To look for work, perhaps?"

"No, no; he has left me altogether. I shall never see him again—never!" said the girl, with sudden passion. "Oh, don't ask me any more, Miss Lettice, I can't bear it!"

"No, no," said Lettice, pitifully, "I will ask you no questions, Milly. You shall tell me all about it or nothing, just as you like. We must not keep the baby out in the night air any longer. Come round to the door, and Mrs. Chigwin will let you in. I will tell her that you want a night's lodging, and then we will arrange what you are to do to-morrow."

Milly did not move, however, from her position by the wall. She had ceased to sob, and was twisting her handkerchief nervously between her fingers.

"Do you think Mrs. Chigwin would let me in," she said at last, in a very low voice, "if she *knew?*"

Lettice waited; she saw there was more to come.

"Oh, Miss Lettice," said the girl, with a subdued agony in her tone which went to Lettice's heart; "it wasn't all my fault. . . . . I believed in him so. . . . . I thought he would never deceive me nor behave unkindly to me. But I was deceived: I never was his wife, though I thought—I thought I was!"

"My dear," said Lettice, gently, "then you were not to blame. Mrs. Chigwin would only be sorry for you if she knew. But we will not tell her everything at once; you must just come in, if only for baby's sake, and get some food and rest. Come with me now."

And Milly yielded, feeling a certain comfort and relief in having so far told the truth to her former mistress.

Mrs. Chigwin's surprise, when she saw Lettice coming back with the baby in her arms, may well be imagined. But she behaved very kindly: she at once consented to take in Milly for the night and make her comfortable; and, after one keen look at the girl's changed and downcast face, she asked no questions.

For Milly was wonderfully changed—there was no doubt of that. Her pretty fair hair was cropped close to her head; her eyes were sunken, and the lids were red with tears; the bloom had faded from her cheeks, and the roundness of youth had passed from face and form alike. Ill-health and sorrow had gone far to rob her of her fresh young beauty; and the privations which she confessed to having experienced during the last few days had hollowed her eyes, sharpened her features, and bowed her slender form. Her dress was travel-stained and shabby; her boots were down at heel and her thin hands were gloveless. Lettice noticed that she still wore a wedding-ring. But the neat trim look that had once been so characteristic was entirely lost. She was bedraggled and broken down; and Lettice thought with a thrill of horror of what might have happened if Mrs. Chigwin had left Birchmead, or refused to take the wayfarer in. For a woman in Milly's state there would probably have remained only two ways open—the river or the streets.

"I've never had five in my cottage before," said Mrs. Chigwin, cheerfully; "but where there's room for two there's room for half-a-dozen; at least, when they're women and children."

"You must have wondered what had become of me all this time," said Lettice.

"Nay, ma'am; you were in the garden, and that was enough for me. I knew you couldn't be in a better place, whether you were sorrowing or rejoicing. Nought but good comes to one in a garden."

They set food before Milly, and let her rest and recover herself. The child won their hearts at once. It was clean, and healthy, and good to look at; and if Lettice had known that it was her own little niece she could not have taken to it more kindly. Perhaps, indeed, she would not have taken to it at all.

Lettice's visit had greatly excited Mrs. Bundlecombe, who had for some time past been in that precarious state in which any excitement, however slight, is dangerous. She was completely happy, because she had jumped to the conclusion that Lettice would henceforth do for Alan all that she herself would have done if she had been able, but which it was now impossible for her to do. And then it was as though the feeble vitality which remained to her had begun to ebb away from the moment when her need for keeping it had disappeared.

In the early morning, Lettice was roused from her sleep by the restlessness of her companion, and she sat up and looked at her.

"Dearie," said the old woman, in a whisper, "my time is come."

"No, no!" said Lettice, standing by her side. "Let me raise you a little on the pillow; you will feel better presently."

"Yes—better—in heaven! You will take care of my Alan?"

"Oh yes, dear!"

"And love him?"

"And love him."

"Thank God for that. It will be the saving of him. Call Martha, my dear!"

Lettice went and roused Mrs. Chigwin, who came and kissed her friend. Then, with a last effort, Aunt Bessy raised her head, and whispered,

"'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace!'"

The watchers scarcely heard the words; but when she sank back upon her pillow, and smiled as though she had found the peace which passes understanding, they knew that she had gone.

Lettice stayed on at Birchmead until she had seen Alan's aunt carried to the church-yard, and laid under the shadow of the great yew trees.

Aunt Bessy's death changed her plans. It was no longer necessary for Alan to undertake so long a journey, and in his weak condition it might be better that he should not attempt it. But what was to be done? She had promised Aunt Bessy to "take care of him." How could she do it? How do it, at least, without outraging the feelings of her brother and her friends? She loved Sydney, although she had long ago ceased to be greatly in sympathy with him, and she had looked forward to the day when she could make friends with his wife and—by and by—interest herself in their children. She knew that Sydney would be against her in this. Ought she to consider him? Should his opinion weigh with her or not?

She was still pondering this question on the day after the funeral, when something happened which went far towards removing her hesitation. She was sitting in Mrs. Chigwin's garden, which was warm and dry in the afternoon sun. Mrs. Chigwin was indoors, vigorously "straightening" the house. Milly was sewing a frock for her child, and the child itself was tumbling about on a soft rug at her feet.

During the past few days, little had been said respecting Milly's future. Mrs. Bundlecombe's death had thrown her history into the background, and she had not seemed eager to obtrude it on any of her friends. Lettice's assurance that she might safely stay where she was at present seemed to satisfy her. She had lost her briskness—her occasional pertness—of manner; she was quiet and subdued, attaching herself with dog-like fidelity to Lettice's steps, and showing that no satisfaction was so great as that of being allowed to wait on her. But her submissiveness had something in it which pained Lettice, while it touched the deepest fibres of pity in her heart.

She was vaguely wondering what it was that pained her—why there should be that touch of something almost like subserviency in Milly's manner, as if to make up for some past injury—when her eyes were arrested by a locket, which, tied by a black ribbon round Milly's neck, had escaped from the bosom of her dress, and now hung exposed to view.

It contained a portrait of Sydney's face, evidently cut from a photograph by the girl herself.

A flood of light entered Lettice's mind; but she took her discovery with outward calmness. No thought of accusing or upbraiding Milly ever occurred to her. Why should it? she would have said. It was not Milly who had been to blame, if the girl's own story were true. It was Sydney who had been guilty of the blackest treachery, the basest of all crimes. She thought for a moment of his wife, with pity; she looked with a new interest and tenderness at the innocent child. She had no certainty—that was true; but she had very little doubt as to the facts of the case. And, at any rate, she allowed her suspicion to decide her own course of action. Why need she care any longer what Sydney desired for her? His standard was not hers. She was not bound to think of his verdict—now. He had put himself out of court. She was not sure that she should even love him again, for the whole of her pure and generous nature rose up in passionate repudiation of the man who could basely purchase his own pleasure at the expense of a woman's soul, and she knew that he had thenceforth lost all power over her. No opinion of his on any matter of moral bearing could ever sway her again. The supreme scorn of his conduct which she felt impelled her to choose her own line of action, to make—or mar—for herself her own career.

It was one of those moments in which the action of others has an unexpectedly vivifying result. We mortals may die, but our deed lives after us, and is immortal, and bears fruit to all time, sometimes evil and sometimes good. If the deed has been evil in the beginning, the fruit is often such as we who did it would give our lives, if we had the power, to destroy.

Thus Sydney's action had far-off issues which he could not foresee. It ruled the whole course of his sister's after-life.

There was a light shawl on Milly's thin shoulders. Lettice took one end of it and drew it gently over the telltale locket. Then, unmindful of Milly's start, and the feverish eagerness with which her trembling hand thrust the likeness out of sight, she spoke in a very gentle tone:

"You will take cold if you are not more careful of yourself. Have you thought, Milly, what you are to do now? You want to earn a living for yourself and the child, do you not?"

Milly looked at her with frightened, hopeless eyes. Had Miss Lettice seen the locket, and did she mean to cast her off for ever? She stammered out some unintelligible words, but the fear that was uppermost in her mind made her incapable of a more definite reply.

"You must do something for yourself. You do not expect to hear from your child's father again, I supppose?" said Lettice.

"He said—he said—he would send me money—if I wanted it," said Milly, putting up one hand to shade her burning face; "but I would rather not!"

"No, you are quite right. You had better take nothing more from him—unless it is for the child. But I am thinking of yourself. I am going back to London the day after to-morrow, and perhaps I may take a small house again, as I did before. Will you come with me, Milly?'

This offer was too much for the girl's equanimity. She burst into tears and sobbed vehemently, with her head upon her hands, for two or three minutes.

"I couldn't," she said at last. "Oh, you're very good, Miss Lettice—and it isn't that I wouldn't work my fingers to the bone for you—but I couldn't come."

"Why not?"

"I deceived you before. I—I—should be deceiving you again. If you knew—all, you would not ask me."

"I think I should, Milly. Perhaps I know more of your story than you have told me. But—at present, at any rate—I do not want to know more. I am not going to question you about the past. Because you cannot undo what is past, dear, however much you try, but you *can* live as if it had never happened; or, better still, you can live a nobler life than you had strength to live before. Sorrow makes us stronger, Milly, if we take it in the right way. You have your little one to live for; and you must be brave, and strong, and good, for her sake. Will you not try? Will it not be easier now to look forward than to look back? I used to teach you out of an old Book that speaks of 'forgetting the things that are behind.' You must forget the things that lie behind you, Milly, and press forward to the better life that lies before you now."

The girl listened with an awed look upon her face.

"I am afraid," she murmured.

"Forget your fear, dear, with the other things that you have to forget, and gather up your strength to make your little girl's life a good and happy one. In that way, good will come out of evil—as it so often does. Will you try?"

"Yes," said Milly, "I'll try—if you will help me—and—forgive me."

"You will come with me, then," Lettice rejoined, in a more cheerful tone. "You can bring your child with you, and you shall have money enough to clothe her and yourself; but you know, Milly, you must be ready to work and not to be idle. Then I shall be able to help you."

Milly was glad enough to be persuaded. She had learned a sad and bitter lesson, but she was the wiser for it.

"I shall be able to work better for you than I did at Maple Cottage," she said, with touching humility. "You see I know more than I did, and I shall have more heart in my work. And—" with sudden vehemence—" I would work for *you*, Miss Lettice, to my life's end."

So it was arranged that they were to go up to London together. Mrs. Chigwin moaned a little about her prospect of loneliness. " But there," she said, " I am not going to make the worst of it. And nobody that has a garden is ever really lonely, unless she has lost her self-respect, or taken to loving herself better than her fellow-creatures. By which," she added, " I do not mean snails and sparrows, but honest and sensible flowers."

BOOK VI.

SUCCESS.

"May I reach
That purest heaven, be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty,
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused
And in diffusion ever more intense.
So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose gladness is the music of the world."

GEORGE ELIOT.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT THE PRISON GATE.

Months had passed since Lettice had written a page of her story. The arrival of the Daltons at Florence had interrupted her at a critical point. She had not yet acquired the mechanic art of stopping and going on again as at the turn of a handle, in obedience to a law of demand and supply; and she would probably have been unable to gather up her threads and continue the old woof, even if she had made the effort. But she had not made the effort, and now that she was back in London again it seemed less possible than ever that she should sit down and make it.

This was a serious matter, for the book was to have been done to order. She had undertaken to furnish the whole of the manuscript by the middle of November, and now the time had come when she was obliged to admit that this was quite impracticable. She had hoped to put such a constraint upon herself at Birchmead as would have enabled her to fulfil her promise in the spirit, and to ask a fortnight's grace for the completion of the manuscript. But circumstances had prevented her from writing a single line, and she gave up the idea as hopeless.

So when she came up to London, three days before the end of October, she called upon the publisher with whom she had made her agreement, and confessed her inability to keep her word. Mr. MacAlpine was polite, but at the same time evidently vexed. If Miss Campion had been ill he was very sorry to hear it, but he liked to be able to rely on the engagements which he made.

"Pray don't let it trouble you," he said, seeing that her face had begun to fall. "When do you think you can be ready? I must have your next story, at any rate. Take another three months."

"That is very good of you," said Lettice. "I think I can promise it before the end of January."

So it was settled, and Lettice went away contented.

The discovery which she had made in regard to Sydney and Emily Harrington had destroyed her former scruples as to the displeasure which Sydney might feel if he were to hear what she now contemplated. She had no wish to punish her brother. She thought he had been cruel, and indifferent to the suffering which he had caused; but she was not moved by anything like a vindictive feeling towards him. She had simply lost the scruples which had beset her, and there was no longer a desire in her mind to avoid a mere semblance of unconventionality for his sake.

She had chosen three rooms on the ground-floor of a house in a long and dreary terrace, the windows of which looked across an intervening waste to the walls of Alan's prison; and here she watched and waited.

The time hung heavy on her hands. She could do nothing, read nothing, think of nothing—except of the unhappy man within those walls, who had been brought to death's door, and who must have known a living death for the past six months. To her, merely looking at the walls and thinking of their victim, every minute seemed an hour, and every hour a day of blank despair. What must the minutes and hours have seemed to him, buried alive in that hideous pile of bricks, and in the yet more hideous pile of false accusations and unmerited disgrace?

She had found out the date of the trial, and procured the papers in which it was reported. The whole wretched story was before her now. She saw how the web had been weaved round him; she understood the pains which had been taken to keep her own name from being mentioned; and she noted with burning indignation the persistency with which Sydney had labored, apparently, to secure a conviction.

She was on the point of seeking out Mr. Larmer, in order to learn from him the assurance of innocence which Alan must have given to his solicitor; but she refrained. It would look as though she wanted evidence of what she believed so absolutely without any evidence; and besides, was it not one of the pleasures which she had promised herself, to hear from Alan's own lips all that he cared for her to hear?

She stood by her window in the evening, and saw the lights spring up one by one about the frowning gates of the prison. She was quite alone, Milly having gone out with her baby to buy her some clothes. Lettice was miserable and depressed, in spite of her good intentions; and as she stood, half leaning against the shutter in unconscious weariness of body, yet intent with all her mind upon the one subject that engrossed her, she heard the distant stroke of a tolling bell.

Dong!—dong!—dong! it sounded, with long intervals between the notes. Straight across the vacant ground, from the shrouded walls of Alan's dungeon, and into the contracting fibres of her own tortured heart, it smote with sudden terror, turning her blood to ice and her cheeks to livid whiteness.

Great heaven, it was a death-knell. Could it be Alan who was dead!

For a moment she felt as if she must needs rush into the street and break open those prison gates, must ascertain at once that Alan was still alive. She went out into the hall and stood for a moment hesitating. Should she go? and would they tell her at the gates if Alan was alive or dead?

The landlady heard her moving, and came out of a little apartment at the back of the house, to see what was going on.

"Were you going out, ma'am?" she asked, curiously.

"I? no; at least," said Lettice, with somewhat difficult utterance, "I was only wondering what that bell was, and——"

"Oh, that's a bell from the church close by. Sounds exactly like a passing-bell, don't it, ma'am? And appropriate too. For my son, who is one of the warders, as I think I've mentioned to you, was here this afternoon, and tells me that one of the prisoners is dead. A gentleman, too: the one that there was so much talk about a little while ago."

Lettice leaned against the passage wall, glad that in the gathering darkness her face could not be seen.

"Was his name—Walcott?" she asked.

"Yes, that was it. At least I think so. I know it was Wal— something. He was in for assault, I believe, and a nicer, quieter-spoken gentleman, my son says he never saw. But he died this afternoon, I understand, between five and six o'clock—just as his time was nearly out, too, poor man."

Lettice made no answer. She stole back into her sitting-room and shut the door.

So this was the end. The prisoner was released, indeed; but no mortal voice had told him he was free, no earthly friend had met him at the door.

She fell on her knees, and prayed that the soul which had been persecuted might have rest. Then, when the last stroke of the bell had died away, she sat down in mute despair, and felt that she had lost the best thing life had to give her.

Outside upon the pavement men and women were passing to and fro. There was no forecourt to the house; passers-by walked close to the windows; they could look in if they tried. Lettice had not lighted a candle, and had not drawn her blinds, but a gas-lamp standing just in front threw a feeble glimmer into the room, which fell upon her where she sat. As the shadows deepened the light grew stronger, and falling direct upon her eyes, roused her at last from the lethargy into which she had sunk.

She got up and walked to the window, intending to close the shutters. Listlessly for a moment she looked out into the street, where the gas-light flickered upon the meeting streams of humanity—old folk and young, busy and idle, hopeful and despairing, all bent on their own designs, heedless like herself of the jostling world around them.

She had the shutter in her hand, and was turning it upon its hinges, when a face in the crowd suddenly arrested her. She had seen it once, that ghastly painted face, and it had haunted her in her dreams for weeks and months afterwards. It had tyrannized over her in her sickness, and only left her in peace when she began to recover her strength under the bright Italian skies. And now she saw her again, the wife who had wrecked her husband's happiness, for whom he had lingered in a cruel prison, who flaunted herself in the streets whilst Alan's brave and generous heart was stilled for ever.

Cora turned her face as she passed the window, and looked in. She might not in that uncertain light have recognized the woman whose form stood out from the darkness behind her, but an impulse moved Lettice which she could not resist. At the moment when the other turned her head she beckoned to her with her hand, and quickly threw up the sash of the window.

"Mon Dieu!" said Cora, coming up close to her, "is it really you? What do you want with me?"

"Come in! I must speak to you."

"I love you not, Lettice Campion, and you love not me. What would you?"

"I have a message for you—come inside."

"A message! Sapristi! Then I must know it. Open your door."

Lettice closed the window and the shutters, and brought her visitor inside.

The woman of the study and the woman of the pavement looked at each other, standing face to face for some minutes without speaking a word. They were a contrast of civilization, whom nature had not intended to contrast, and it would have been difficult to find a stronger antagonism between two women who under identical training and circumstances might have been expected to develop similar tastes, and character, and bearing. Both had strong and well-turned figures, above the middle height, erect and striking, both had noble features, natural grace and vivacity, constitutions which fitted them for keen enjoyment and zest in life. But from their infancy onward they had been subjected to influences as different as it is possible to imagine. To one duty had been the ideal and the guide of existence; the other had been taught to aim at pleasure as the supreme good. One had ripened into a self-sacrificing woman, to whom a spontaneous feeling of duty was more imperative than the rules and laws in which she had been trained; the other had degenerated into a wretched slave of her instincts, for whom the pursuit of pleasure had become a hateful yet inevitable servitude. Perhaps, as they stood side by side, the immeasurable distance which divided them mind from mind and body from body was apparent to both. Perhaps each thought at that moment of the man whose life they had so deeply affected—perhaps each realized what Alan Walcott must have thought and felt about the other.

"Why have you brought me here?" said Cora at last in a defiant voice.

"It was a sudden thought. I saw you, and I wanted to speak to you."

"Then you have no message as you pretended? You are very polite, mademoiselle. You are pleased to amuse yourself at my expense?"

"No, I am not amusing myself," said Lettice. There was a ring of sadness in her tones, which did not escape Cora's attention. She argued weakness from it, and grew more bold.

"Are you not afraid?" she said, menacingly. "Do you not think that I have the power to hurt—as I have hurt you before—the power, and, still more, the will?"

"I am not afraid."

"Not afraid! You are hatefully quiet and impassive, just like—ah, like all your race! Are you always so cold and still? Have you no blood in your veins?"

"If you will sit down," said Lettice steadily, "I will tell you something that you ought to know. It is useless trying to frighten me with your threats. Sit down and rest if you will; I will get you food or coffee, if you care for either. But there is something that I want to say."

Cora stared at her scornfully. "Food! Coffee! Do you think I am starving?" she asked, with a savage little laugh. "I have as much money as I want—more than you are ever likely to have, mademoiselle. You are very naive, mon enfant. You invite me into your room—Lettice Campion invites Cora Walcott into her room!—where nobody knows us, nobody could trace us—and you quietly ask me to eat and drink! Eat and drink in this house? It is so likely! How am I to tell, for example, if your coffee is not poisoned? You would not be very sorry if I were to die! Parbleu, if you want to poison me, you should tempt me with brandy or champagne. Have you neither of those to offer me?"

Lettice had drawn back at the first hint of this insinuation, with a look of irrepressible disgust. She answered coldly, "I have neither brandy nor champagne to give you."

"Allons, donc! Why do I stay here then?" said Cora jumping up from the chair where she had seated herself. "This is very wearisome. Your idea was not very clever, Mademoiselle Lettice; you should lay your plans better if you want to trick a woman like me."

"Why should I wish to trick you?" said Lettice, with grave, quiet scorn. "What object could I have in killing you?"

"Ma foi, what object should you not have? Revenge, of course. Have I not injured you? have I not taken away your good name already? All who know you have heard my story, and many who do not know you; and nearly every one of them believes it to be true. You robbed me of my husband, mademoiselle, you know it; and you have but too good reason to wish me dead, in order that you may take a wife's place at the convict's side."

"You are mad. Listen to me——"

"I will listen to nothing. I will speak now. I will give you a last warning. Do you know what this is?"

She took a bottle from her pocket, a bottle of fluted, dark-colored glass, and held it in her hand.

"Look! This is vitriol, the friend of the injured and the defenceless. I have carried it with me ever since I followed my husband to your house at Brook Green, and saw you making signals to him at midnight. I came once after that, and knocked at your door, intending then to avenge my wrongs; but you had gone away, and I was brutally treated by your police. But if I could not punish you I could punish *him*, for he belonged to me and not to you, and I had a right to make him suffer. I have made him suffer a little, it seems to me. Wait—I have more to say. Shall I make him suffer more? I have punished you through him; shall I punish him through you? For he would not like you to be maimed and disfigured through life: his sensitive soul would writhe, would it not? to know that you were suffering pain. Do you know what this magic water is? It stings and bites and eats away the flesh—it will blind you so that you can never see him again; and it will mar your white face so that he will never want to look at you. This is what I carry about for you."

Lettice watched the hand that held the bottle; but in truth she thought very little of the threat. Death had done for her already what this woman was talking about. Alan was past the love or vengeance of either of them, and all her pleasure in life was gone for ever.

"I thought I should find you here," Cora went on, "waiting at the prison for your lover! But I am waiting for him, too. I am his wife still. I have the right to wait for him, and you have not. And if you are there when he comes out, I shall stay my hand no longer. I warn you; so be prepared. But perhaps"—and she lifted the bottle, while her eyes flamed with dangerous light, and her voice sank to a sharp whisper—"perhaps it would be better to settle the question now!"

"The question," said Lettice, with almost unnatural calm of manner, "is settled for us. Alan has left his prison. Your husband is dead."

The woman gazed at her in stupefaction. Her hand fell to her side, and the light died out of her bold black eyes.

"Alan dead! What is it you say? How do you know?"

"He had a fever in the jail to which you sent him. He has been at death's door for many weeks. Not an hour ago a warder came here and said that he was dead. Are you satisfied with your work?"

"My work?" said Cora, drawing back. "I have not killed him!"

"Yes," said Lettice, a surge of bitter anger rising in her heart, "yes, you have killed him, as surely as you tried to kill him with your pistol at Aix-les-Bains, and with his own dagger in Surrey Street. You are a murderess, and you know it well. But for you, Alan Walcott would still be living an honorable, happy life. You have stabbed him to the heart, and he is dead. That is the message I have to give you—to tell you that you have killed him, and that he is gone to a land where your unnatural hate can no longer follow him!"

Lettice stood over the cowering woman, strong and unpitying in her stern indignation, lifted out of all thought of herself by the intensity of her woe. Cora shrank away from her, slipping the bottle into her pocket, and even covertly making the sign of the cross as Lettice's last words fell upon her ear—words that sounded to her untutored imagination like a curse. But she could not be subdued for long. She stood silent for a few moments when Lettice ceased to speak, but finally a forced laugh issued from the lips that had grown pale beneath her paint.

"Tiens!" she said. "You will do the mourning for us both, it seems. Well, as I never loved him, you cannot expect me to cry at his death. And I shall get his money, I suppose; the money that he grudged me in his life-time: it will be mine now, and I can spend it as I choose. I thank you for your information, mademoiselle, and I pardon you the insults which you have heaped upon my head to-night. If I have my regrets, I do not exhibit them in your fashion. Good-night, mademoiselle: il me faut absolument de l'eau de vie—I can wait for it no longer. Bon soir!"

She turned and left the house as rapidly as she had come. Lettice sank down upon a couch, and hid her face in the cushion. She could not shed a tear, but she was trembling from head to foot, and felt sick and faint.

As Cora sauntered along the pavement, turning her head restlessly from side to side, her attention was caught by a young woman carrying a child, who went in at Lettice's door. Mrs. Walcott stopped short, and put her finger to her forehead with a bewildered air. "Now where have I seen that face?" she muttered to herself.

After a moment's reflection, she burst into a short, harsh laugh, and snapped her fingers at the blind of Lettice's room. "I know now," she said. "Oh yes, I know where I have seen that face before. This will justify me in the eyes of the world as nothing else has done. Bon soir, Madame Lettice. Oh, I have a new weapon against you now."

And then she went upon her way, leaving behind her the echo of her wicked laugh upon the still night air.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A BRAVE PURPOSE.

If Lettice had not seen Cora when she did, she would probably have gone to the prison that evening, to ask whether she could not arrange for Alan's funeral, as she could not arrange for his release. Her spirit was crushed by the blow which had fallen on her, but she could not give way so long as his body was there to receive the last token of her love. When the Frenchwoman left her it was too late to see Captain Haynes, even if she had been physically able to make the attempt.

It never occurred to her to think that any mistake could have been made in the information she had received from her landlady. The struggle which had been going on in her mind, the consciousness that she had broken with all her old friends, the exaltation which had possessed her since she resolved to give to Alan all that was possible for her to give, or seemed to be worth her giving, the death of his aunt and the thought of his loneliness, had combined to make her nervously apprehensive. As soon as she had settled down under the shadow of the prison walls, the idea took hold of her with unaccountable force that the life of Alan was hanging by a thread, and the news of his death came to her only as the full confirmation of her fears.

But, as it happened, there was another man in the prison named Walters, who had been convicted of an assault upon his wife some time previously, and had been ill for many months of an internal complaint which was certain, sooner or later, to end fatally.

A sleepless night brought Lettice no ray of hope, and it was with a heavy and despairing heart that she went to the governor's residence next morning, and sent up to him the note which she had written before leaving her room.

Captain Haynes remembered her former visit, and being disengaged at the moment, he came down at once.

"My dear lady," he said, bustling into the room, "what is the meaning of this letter? What makes you talk of burying your friend? He has been in this tomb of stone long enough to purge him of all his offenses, and I am sure you don't want to bury him alive again!"

Lettice started to her feet, gazed at the speaker with straining eyes, and pressed her hands upon her tumultuous heart.

"Is—he—alive?" she gasped, in scarcely audible words.

"Of course he is alive! I told you when you were here before that he was out of danger. All he wants now is careful nursing and cheerful company; and I must say that you don't quite look as if you could give him either."

"Alive—alive! Thank God!"

A great wave of tenderness swept through her heart, and gushed from her eyes in tears that were eloquent of happiness.

"I was told that he was dead!" She looked at the governor with a smile which disarmed his bluff tongue.

"I am on the border-land of a romance," he thought, "and a romance of which the ending will be pleasanter than the beginning, unless I am much mistaken. This is not the wife; it is the woman he was writing his verses to before he took the fever. The doctor says she has written the best novel of the year. Novels and poetry—umph! not much in my line."

Then aloud, "you are under a mistake. A man named Walters died yesterday; perhaps that is how you have been misled. Some rumor of his death must have got abroad. Mr. Walcott is getting over his illness very nicely; but he will need a good rest, good food, and as much cheerfulness as you can give him. I told him, just now, that you had arranged to meet him to-morrow, and I fancy it roused him more than anything Dr. Savill has done for him. I must wish you good-morning, madam!—but let me impress upon you again, before you go, that he is to be kept perfectly quiet, free from anxiety, and as cheerful as you can manage to make him."

Captain Haynes was rather ashamed of the laxity into which Miss Campion had drawn him. He was not accustomed to display so much sympathy with his prisoners, whatever he may have felt in his own mind. But, to be sure, the case was quite exceptional. He did not have prisoners like Alan or visitors like Lettice every day. So he had no difficulty in finding excuses for himself.

Lettice walked on air as she came out of the precincts of the jail, which had now lost all its terrors. In less than twenty-four hours she was to come again, and transport her hero—whom the dense and cruel world had branded as a criminal—from slavery to freedom, from misery to peace and joy. The world had cast him out; well, then, let the world stand aside, that she might give this man what was his due.

What would she say to him? Ah, she dare not think of that beforehand!

What would she do for him? For one thing, she would give him back his self-respect. He had been the object of scorn and the victim of lying scandals. He should find that the woman he loved intended from henceforth to take those paltry burdens on herself, and to know no other praise or merit than that which came to her from him.

He had borne troubles and suffered injuries which before now had driven men to suicide, or madness, or self-abandonment. In order to save him from any of these things she meant to give herself into his hands, without terms or conditions, in order that the wrong-doing of the world might be righted by her act, were it ever so little.

Who could call that a sacrifice which made her heart so light, her step so elastic, her eyes so bright with hope and satisfaction? It was no sacrifice, but a triumph and reward of the highest kind that she was preparing for herself. How should she not be happy?

There was no time to be lost if she was to provide all that was necessary for the well-being and comfort of her patient before to-morrow morning. Everything had to be done at the last moment. She had been so long in coming to a definite and final resolution to treat this friendless discharged prisoner as a hero and a king, that it was almost too late to make any arrangements. Why had she not done yesterday something of what she had left to be done to day? She scarcely realized to herself that her mind was only just made up. That facile belief in the report of Alan's death was only the outcome of her distress and perplexity—of the failure of her courage on the threshold of decision and action.

With a cold shudder she thought of the dust which she had unwittingly thrown in Cora's eyes. She had told her that her husband was dead, and the tale had been readily believed, for the very opposite reason to that which had prevailed with herself. She had been convinced by her fears—Cora by her hopes and greed. And now she could not undeceive the woman, for she did not know where to find her. Would she if she could? Perhaps it was the the best thing which could have happened; for it would be terrible if Alan were to step out of his prison back into the hell on earth which that woman had created for him.

Well, now, at any rate, she must devote herself to the task which she had undertaken. She felt as a sister might feel who had been suddenly commissioned to provide a home within twenty-four hours for an invalided traveler; and she set about the work with enthusiasm.

She began by taking Milly in some measure into her confidence, and giving her a number of directions as to what she was to do in the course of the day. Then she hired a cab, and went to a house-agent whose name she remembered. That seemed the quickest way of getting what she wanted—a small furnished house, cheerful and yet retired, which she could take at any rate for a month, and for longer if she needed it. The agent by good chance had the very thing she asked for. He turned over the leaves of his register, and presently came upon "a desirable bijou residence, plainly but adequately furnished, containing three reception rooms and five bedrooms, conservatory, with large and well-stocked garden, lawn and shrubbery, coach-house and stable. Vacant for three months ; very moderate terms to a suitable tenant." That sounded well. The " very moderate terms " came to something more than Lettice wanted to give ; but she had a hundred pounds in her pocket, and a spirit which disdained to grudge in such a service.

So, having journeyed to Chiswick, and found Bute Lodge to be, if not precisely a jewel amongst lodges, at any rate clean and comfortable, she came back to the agent with an offer to take it from month to month, and with a roll of notes ready to clinch the bargain. Money is the best reference, as she found when she paid a month's rent on the spot, and promised that all her payments should be in advance. But, as the agent had asked her for a reference of another kind, Lettice, who had expected this demand, and was prepared for it, gave the name of James Graham. She ought not to have made use of him without asking him beforehand. She might have referred to the owner of Maple Cottage, where she had lived when last in London, or even to her publisher. But she wanted to go and see her old friend Clara ; and, woman-like, did a more important thing to serve as a pretext for a less important.

Clara Graham was delighted to see her again, and the two women had a long and confidential talk.

" I, at any rate," said Clara, " have never doubted his innocence, and I was sure that you would not."

" Yet you never told me what troubles had fallen upon him ! "

" My dear, I thought you must have heard about it all. But the fact was that James asked me not to mention the trial. Remember, you were not well at the time ; and it was a difficult case. I could not quite assume that your interest would be strong enough to justify me in risking the loss of your health—perhaps of your life. Really, it is a hard question to deal with—like one of those cases of conscience (didn't they call them ?) which men used to argue for the sake of having something to do. I stood up for poor Mr. Walcott with my husband ; but you know it is useless to argue against him."

" He believes with the rest of them ? '

" Everybody believes alike. I never heard of one who thought that he did not do it."

"Only yourself!"

"Yes, and that was, perhaps, for your sake," said Clara, affectionately.

"And I suppose that I believe in him for his own sake."

"That is natural; but will people think that it is logical?"

"No, they won't," said Lettice, "at all events, not at first. But, gradually perhaps, they will. I am perfectly convinced that Alan did not stab his wife—because I feel it with a force that amounts to conviction. You see, I know his character, his past history, the character and history of his wife, the circumstances in which they were placed at the time. I am sure he is innocent, and I am going to act up to it. Alan will live down this horrible accusation and punishment—he will not give way, but will keep his self-respect, and will do infinitely better work for all the torture he has gone through. And our hope must be this—that when the world sees him stronger than ever, stronger in every way, and doing stronger work in his vocation, it will come to believe in him, one by one, beginning with us, until his vindication is brought about, not by legal proof, which is impossible, but by the same feeling and conviction which to-day only draw two weak women to the side of an unhappy and discredited man."

"Are you calling yourself a weak woman? You have the strength of a martyr, and in days when they used to burn women you would have chosen to be a martyr."

"I am not so sure. It is one thing to do what one likes, but quite another thing to burn, which no one likes."

"Well, you are very brave, and you will succeed as you deserve. But not at first."

"No, not at first. The hardest task will be with Alan, who has been in despair all these months, and at death's door with fever. He will come out weak, helpless, hopeless; there will be constant danger of a relapse; and, even if he can be made to forget his despair, it will be very difficult to restore him to cheerfulness." Her eyes filled with pitying tears as she spoke.

"Only one thing can do that!" Clara stroked her friend's bright brown hair, and kissed her on the cheek. "With you for his doctor he will soon be well."

"Only two things can do it—a joy greater than his sorrow, and a self-respect greater than his self-abasement."

Lettice stood up; and the far reaching look that Clara knew so well came into the true and tender grey eyes, strong with all the rapt purpose of a devoted woman. Her resolutions were forming and strengthening as she went on. She had been guided by instinct and feeling, but they were guiding her aright.

There was one thing more in which Clara was a help to her. She took her to an old woman, the mother of her own parlor-maid, exceptionally clean and respectable, whom Lettice engaged to go at once to Bute Lodge, taking a younger daughter with her, and make everything ready for the morrow.

"I shall come and see you soon," said Clara, as they wished each other good-bye.

"Do! And if you can convert your husband——"

"If not, it will not be for want of trying."

It was evening before Lettice was at her lodging again. She had done all that she could think of—made every preparation and taken every precaution—and now there was nothing left but to wait until the appointed hour should strike, and Alan should be a free man again.

One concession she made to Mrs. Graham's sense of propriety. There was an old lady who had once been Clara's governess—a gentle, mild-tongued, unobservant person, who was greatly in want of a home. Mrs. Alison was easily induced to promise the support of her presence to Lettice during the days or weeks which Lettice hoped to spend at Bute Lodge. She was a woman of unimpeachable decorum and respectability, and her presence in the house would, in Clara's opinion, prove a bulwark against all dangers; but, although evil tongues might be silenced by the fact of her presence, the old lady was singularly useless in the capacity of chaperon. She was infirm, a little deaf, and very shy; but her presence in the house was supposed to be a sop to Cerberus, in the person of Mrs. Grundy, and Clara was less afraid for her friend than she had been before Mrs. Alison was installed at Bute Lodge.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FROM PRISON TO PARADISE.

PUNCTUALLY at ten o'clock on the 29th of October a brougham drove up to the gates of the prison in which Alan Walcott had spent his six months of retreat from the world; and almost immediately Alan made his appearance, leaning on the arm of a warder.

Lettice hurried to meet him, displacing the warder with a few words of thanks, and repressing with an effort the painful throbbing of her heart and throat. The sight of his shrunken form and hollow eyes, as he looked at her with pathetic and childlike trust, for a moment took away all her strength; but when his hand was laid upon her arm, and she accommodated her steps to his slow and unsteady movements, he found in her no trace of the weakness she had overcome.

It was clear that he had not yet made a good recovery from his fever. Lettice's last little qualm of doubt as to the use or need for what she had done disappeared as she saw this wreck of the man whom she loved—whom she believed to be innocent of offense and persecuted by an evil fate. What might have become of him if he had been left to crawl out of his prison into the cold and censorious world, without a friend, a hope, or an interest in life? What lowest depth of despair might he not have touched if in such a plight as this he should be found and tortured anew by his old enemy, whose cruelty was evidently not assuaged by the sufferings she had heaped upon him? Who now would say that he had no need of succor, that her service was unasked, unwarranted, unwomanly, that the duty of a pure and delicate soul was to leave him either to his own wife or to the tender mercies of strangers?

The carriage was piled with cushions and shawls, the day was bright and warm, Lettice was full of light gossip and cheerfulness, and Alan had reason to think that he had never had a more delightful drive.

"Where are you taking me?" he said, with a smile of restful gratitude, which clearly implied, "I do not care where it is, so long as I am taken by you!"

"You are going to a convalescent home, where you will be the only patient. If you obey the rules, you may get well in a month, and the first rule is that you are not to ask questions, or to think about unpleasant things."

"Are you my nurse?"

"That is the first breach of rules! They are very strict at this home, I can tell you!"

She spoke in a playful mood, but it left him with the impression that he was really being taken to a "home" of some kind, where he was to be nursed until he was well. He had no objection to make. He would have gone anywhere with equal pleasure, if he could be sure that she would be there to look after him. His one thought in prison, when he lay in the grip of fever, was that he must surely die before his sentence had run out. That was his hope and belief from day to day; and only when he heard that Lettice had come and made inquiries about him, and promised to fetch him as soon as he was released, did any real desire for life return to him. Now, in her presence, he was so completely happy that he forgot all his former sufferings and despair.

Weak as he was, he would have found words to tell her of his gratitude—and of much more than gratitude; but this because of, not in spite of, weakness—if she had not carefully checked him whenever he tried to speak. Fortunately, it was not at all hard to check him. He was infirm in mind as in body. Apart from the illness, which sapped his energies and paralyzed his power of thought, he had never thrown off the cloud of callous and despairing indifference which fell upon him after the fatal scene in Surrey Street. Add to this that the surrender of his independence to Lettice was in itself a pleasure to him, and we need not wonder that her self-imposed task seemed to her fairly easy of accomplishment.

At Bute Lodge they found everything very nice and comfortable. Mrs. Jermy and Mrs. Beadon (as Milly was to be called), who had come earlier in the morning with a cabful of yesterday's purchases, had carried out Lettice's instructions to the letter. The best room in the house looked out upon a delightful garden landscape—two borders, backed by well-grown box and bay-trees, holly, Irish yews, and clambering roses, with a lessening crowd of herbaceous plants in front, dwindling down to an edge of brilliant annuals on either side ; and between these a long and level lawn, broken near the house by a lofty deodara, and ending in a bowling-green, and a thickly-planted bank of laurels, beyond which lay a far-off vista of drooping fruit-trees. The garden was reached through a small conservatory built outside a French window at one end of the room, and a low verandah ran along the remainder of the garden front.

Inside, all was as Lettice had planned it. A square writing table in front of the window was covered with a dozen of the books which had made most noise during the past season, with the November magazines, and the weekly papers which Alan had been wont to read. Milly had cut them all over night, and here they lay, with an easy-chair beside them, ready to tempt the student when he felt inclined and able to read. That was not just yet ; but Alan saw the pile, and darted at his guardian angel another look of gratitude from his lustrous, melancholy eyes.

"Why, here," he said, looking round the room and out upon the garden, "a man must get well only too soon ! I shall steadily refuse to mend."

"You will not be able to help yourself," said Lettice. "Now you are going to be left alone——"

"Not alone !"

"For half an-hour at the very least. All this floor belongs to you, and you are to have nothing to do with stairs. When you want anything you are to ring this bell, and Milly, whom you saw when we came in, will attend on you. Here, on this sideboard, are wine, and biscuits, and jelly, and grapes. Sit down and let me give you a glass of wine. We will have some lunch at one, tea at four, and dinner at seven—but you are to be eating grapes and jelly in between. The doctor will come and see you every morning."

"What doctor ?"

"Why, the doctor of the Establishment, to be sure !"

"Oh, this is an Establishment ?"

"Yes."

"It is more rational in its plan than some I have heard of, since it takes in your nurse and your nurse's maid. Will this precious doctor dine with us?"

"This precious! You are to have great faith in your doctor; but I am sorry to say he will not be able to dine with us. He has other occupations, you see; and for company I am afraid you will have to be content with such as your nurse may be disposed to give you!"

Before he could say anything else, she had left the room.

He was alone—alone and happy.

Straight from prison to paradise. That was what the morning's work meant for him, and he could not think with dry eyes of the peri who had brought him there.

Oh, the bitterness of that dungeon torture, when his heart had been branded with shame and seared with humiliation; when he had sworn that life had no more hope or savor for him, and the coming out from his cell had seemed, by anticipation, worse than the going in!

This was the coming out, and he was already radiant with happiness, oblivious of suffering, hopeful of the future. It was enough, he would not probe it, he would not peer into the dark corners of his prospect; he would simply realize that his soul had been lost, that it had been found by Lettice, and that it was hers by right of trover, as well as by absolute surrender.

The midday sun shone in at his window and tempted him to the verandah outside. Here he found one of those chairs, delightful to invalids and lazy men, which are constructed of a few crossed pieces of wood and a couple of yards of sacking, giving nearly all the luxury of a hammock without its disturbing element of insecurity. And by its side, wonderful to relate, there was a box of cigarettes and some matches. Since they were there, he might as well smoke one. His last smoke was seven or eight months ago—quite long enough to give a special relish to this particular roll of Turkish tobacco.

As he lay back in his hammock chair, and sent one ring chasing another to the roof of the verandah, he heard a step on the gravel beneath him. Lettice, with a basket in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other, was collecting flowers and leaves for her vases. Unwilling to leave him too much alone, until she saw how he would bear his solitude, she had come out into the garden by a door at the other end of the house, and presently, seeing him in the verandah, approached with a smile.

"Do I look as if I were making myself at home?" he said.

"Quite."

"As soon as I began to smoke, all kinds of things came crowding into my mind."

"Not unpleasant things, I hope?" She said this quickly, being indeed most afraid lest he should be tempted to dwell on the disagreeable past.

"No, almost all pleasant. And there are things I want to say to you—that I must say to you, very soon. Do you think I can take for granted all you have done, and all you are doing for me? Let me come down and join you!"

"No!" she said, with a great deal of firmness in her gesture and tone. "You must not do anything of the kind until the doctor has seen you; and besides, we can speak very well here."

The verandah was only a few feet above the ground, so that Lettice's head was almost on a level with his own.

"There is no difficulty about speaking," she went on, "but I want you to let me have the first word, instead of the last. This is something I wanted to say to you, but I did not know how to manage it before. It is really very important that you should not fatigue or excite yourself by talking, and the doctor will tell you so when he comes. Now if you think that you have anything at all to thank me for, you will promise not to speak to me on any personal matters, not even your own intentions for the future, for one clear month from to-day! Don't say it is impossible, because, you see, it is as much as my place (as nurse) is worth to listen to you! If you will promise, I can stay; and if you will not promise, I must go away."

"That is very hard!"

"But it is very necessary. You promise?"

"Have I any choice? I promise."

"Thank you!" She said this very earnestly, and looked him in the eyes with a smile which was worth a faggot of promises.

"But you don't expect me to be deaf and dumb all the time?" said Alan.

"No, of course not! I have been told that you ought to be kept as cheerful as possible, and I mean to do what I can to make you so. Do you like to be read to!"

"Yes, very much."

"Then I will read to you as long as you please, and write your letters, and—if there were any game——"

"Ah, now, if by good luck you knew chess?'

"I do know chess. I played my father nearly every evening at Angleford."

"What a charming discovery! And that reminds me of something. Is there any reason why I should not write to Mr. Larmer? He has some belongings of mine, for one thing, which I should like him to send me, including a set of chess-men."

"No reason at all. But you ought not to write or talk of business, if you can help it, until you are quite strong."

"Well, then, I won't. I will ask him to send what I want in a cab; and then, when I am declared capable of managing my own affairs, I will go into town and see him. But the fact is, that I really feel as well as ever I did in my life!"

"You may feel it, but it is not the case."

And later in the day, Alan was obliged to confess that he had boasted too soon, for there was a slight return of fever, and the doctor whom Lettice had called in was more emphatic than she had been as to the necessity for complete rest of mind and body.

So for the next week he was treated quite as an invalid, to his great disgust. Then he fairly turned the corner, and things began to change for the better again. Lettice read to him, talked, played chess, found out his tastes in music and in art (tastes in some respects a little primitive, but singularly fine and true, in spite of their want of training), and played his favorite airs for him on the piano—some of Mendelssohn's plaintive Lieder, the quainter and statelier measures of Corelli and Scarlatti, snatches of Schumann and Grieg, and several older and simpler melodies, for most of which he had to ask by humming a few bars which had impressed themselves on his memory.

As the month wore itself out, the success of Lettice's experiment was in a fair way of being justified. She had charmed the evil spirit of despair from Alan's breast, and had won him back to manly resistance and courageous effort. With returning bodily strength came a greater robustness of mind, and a resolution—borrowed, perhaps, in the first instance, from his companion—to be stronger than his persecutors, and rise superior to his troubles.

In the conversations which grew out of their daily readings, Lettice was careful to draw him as much as possible into literary discussions and criticisms, and Alan found himself dwelling to an appreciative listener on certain of his own ideas on poetic and dramatic methods. There is but a step from methods to instances; and when Lettice came into his room one morning—she never showed herself before mid-day—she saw with delight on the paper before him an unmistakable stream of verses meandering down the middle of the sheet.

He had set to work! Then he was saved—saved from himself, and from the ghouls that harbor in a desolate and outraged mind.

If, beyond this, you ask me how she had gained her end, and done the good thing on which she had set her heart, I cannot tell you, any more than I could make plain the ways in which nature works to bring all her great and marvelous mysteries to pass. Lettice's achievement, like her resolution, argued both heart and intellect. Alan would not have yielded to anyone else, and he yielded to her because he loved her with the feelings and the understanding together. She had mastered his affections and his intelligence at the same time: she left him to hunger and thirst up to the moment of his abject abasement, and then she came unasked, unhoped, from her towering height to his lowest deep, and gave him—herself!

"Do you remember," he said to her once, when he had got her to talk of her successful story, "that bit of Browning which you quote near the end? Did you ever think that I could be infatuated enough to apply the words to myself, and take comfort from them in my trouble?"

She blushed and trembled as he looked at her for an answer.

"I meant you to do it!"

"And I knew you meant it!" he said, not without a dangerous touch of triumph in his voice. "If I were a little bolder than I am, I would carry you to another page of the poet whom we love, and ask if you ever remembered the words of Constance—words that you did not quote——"

Ten times more deeply she blushed at this, knowing almost by instinct the lines of which he thought. Had he not asked her to read "In a Balcony" to him the night before, and had she not found it impossible to keep her voice from trembling when she read Constance's passionate avowal of her love?

> "I know the thriftier way
> Of giving—haply, 'tis the wiser way;
> Meaning to give a treasure, I might dole
> Coin after coin out (each, as that were all,
> With a new largess still at each despair),
> And force you keep in sight the deed, preserve
> Exhaustless till the end my part and yours,
> My giving and your taking; both our joys
> Dying together. Is it the wiser way?
> I choose the simpler; I give all at once.
> Know what you have to trust to, trade upon!
> Use it, abuse it—anything, but think
> Hereafter, 'Had I known she loved me so,
> And what my means, I might have thriven with it.'
> This is your means. I give you all myself."

And in truth, that was the gift which Lettice offered to him—a gift of herself without stint or grudging, a gift complete, open-handed, to be measured by his acceptance, not limited by her reservation. Alan knew it; knew that absolute generosity was the essence of her gift, and that this woman, so far above him in courage, and self-command, and purity, scorned to close her fingers on a single coin of the wealth which she held out to him. And he, like Norbert, answered reverently: "I take you and thank God."

For just because he knew it, and was penetrated to the core by her munificence, he took the draught of love as from a sacred chalice, which a meaner nature would have grasped as a festal goblet. He might have grasped it thus, and the sacramental wine would have been a Circe's potion, and Lettice would have given her gift in vain. But nature does not so miscalculate her highest moods. "Spirits are not finely touched but to fine issues." Lettice's giving was an act of faith, and her faith was justified.

This was the true source of Alan's self-respect, and from self-respect there came a strength greater and more enduring than he had ever known before. Redeemed from the material baseness of his past when he changed the prison cell for Lettice's ennobling presence, he was now saved from the mental and moral feebleness to which he might have sunk by the ordeal through which his soul had passed.

Lettice felt that her work was accomplished, and she was supremely happy. When Clara Graham kept her promise, and came to see her friend—though she had not been able to bring her husband with her—she was struck by the blithe gaiety of Lettice's looks and words.

"There is no need to tell me that you are satisfied!" she said, kissing the tender cheeks, and gazing with wistful earnestness into the eyes that so frankly and bravely met her own.

"Satisfied?" Lettice answered, with something like a sigh. "I never dreamed that satisfaction could be so complete."

When Alan came in, and Clara, who had expected to see a face lined and marred with sorrow, found that he too had caught the radiance of unblemished happiness, she felt that Lettice had not spent her strength in vain. And she went home and renewed her efforts to make her husband see things as she saw them, and to give Alan Walcott his countenance in the literary world.

But that was a task of no slight difficulty. James Graham had always believed Walcott guilty of a barbarous attack on his wife; he thought that he had been lightly punished, and would not admit that he was to be received when he came out of prison as though he had never been sent there. When Clara told him of Lettice's audacity he was terribly shocked—as indeed were all who heard the story—and his resentment against Alan increased. The news that they were happy together did not produce the good effect upon his temper which Clara thought it might have done.

It was Lettice herself who tackled Mrs. Hartley. She wrote her a long and candid letter, very apologetic as regarded her conduct in Italy, but quite the opposite when she spoke of what she had done since she came back to London. The answer was short, but much to the point.

"I thought you would write to me," Mrs. Hartley said, in her note. "I should hardly have forgiven you if you had not. There is some of your letter which I cannot understand, and some which I do not quite agree with. But come and explain it to me. I am an old woman, and have no time to be angry with those I love. Come on Thursday afternoon—alone—and we will have a good talk."

So Lettice went, and made her peace with her old friend, and was admitted to her favor again. But Alan was on probation still. The last thing which he would have expected, or indeed desired, was that he should be received and treated by his former acquaintance as though nothing had happened since he was a welcome guest in their houses. Especially as he and Lettice had not yet settled the question which all their friends were asking: "How would it end?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MISTRESS AND MAID.

POOR Milly Harrington had faithfully kept her promise of amendment. She was as loyal and serviceable to her mistress as any one could be, and evidently did her utmost to show her gratitude to Lettice, studying her tastes, and, as far possible, anticipating her wishes. But it was plain that she was not happy. When not making an effort to be cheerful as part of her daily duty, she would sit brooding over the past and trembling for the future; and, though she tried to conceal her hopeless moods, they had not altogether escaped notice.

Lettice was troubled by Milly's unhappiness. She had taken deep pity on the girl, and wanted, for more reasons than one, to save her from the worst consequences of her mistakes. To see her, in common parlance, "going to the bad"—ruined in body and in soul—would have been to Lettice, for Sydney's sake, a burden almost heavier than she could bear. For this reason had she brought the girl up to London and taken her into her own service again; and from day to day she watched her with kindly interest and concern.

Milly's good looks could scarcely be said to have come back to her, for she was still thin and haggard, with the weary look of one to whom life has brought crushing sorrow and sickness of heart. But her eyes were pretty, and her face, in spite of its worn expression, was interesting and attractive. Lettice was hardly surprised, although a little startled, to find her talking one day in a somewhat confidential manner to a man of highly respectable appearance who was walking across the Common by her side as she came home one day from a shopping expedition. It was, perhaps, natural that Milly should have acquaintances. But Lettice felt a sudden pang of anxiety on the girl's account. She did not know whether she had been seen, and whether it was her duty to speak to her maid about it; but her hesitation was ended by Milly herself, who came to her room that night, and asked to speak with her.

"Well, Milly?"

"I saw you to-day, Miss Lettice, when I was out," said Milly, coloring with the effort of speech.

"Did you? Yes? You were with a friend—I suppose?"

"I wanted to tell you about him," said Milly, nervously. "It's not a friend of mine, it was a messenger—a messenger from *him*."

Lettice sat speechless.

"He does not know what has become of me; and he set this man—his clerk—to find out. He wants to send me some money—not to see me again. He was afraid that I might be—in want."

"And what have you done, Milly?"

"I said I would not take a penny. And I asked the clerk—Mr. Johnson, they call him—not to say that he had seen me. I didn't tell him where I lived."

"Did he say that he would not tell his master?"

"Yes, he promised. I think he will keep his word. He seemed—kind—sorry for me, or something."

"You were quite right, Milly. And I would not speak to the man again if I were you. He may not be so kind and friendly as he seems. I am glad you have told me."

"I couldn't rest till I had spoken. I was afraid you might think harm of me," said the girl, flushing scarlet again, and twisting the corner of her apron.

"I will not think harm of you if you always tell me about your acquaintances as you have done to-day," said Lettice with a smile. "Don't be afraid, Milly. And—if you will trust to me—you need not be anxious about the future, or about the child. I would rather that you did not take money from anyone but myself for your needs and hers. I have plenty for you both."

Milly could not speak for tears. She went away sobbing, and Lettice was left to think over this new turn of affairs.

Was Sydney's conscience troubling him, she wondered, after all?

This was early in November, soon after she came to Bute Lodge, and as the time went on, she could not but notice that the signs of trouble in Milly's face increased rather than diminished. Lettice had a suspicion also that she had not managed to get rid of the man with whom she had been walking on the Common. She was sure that she saw him in the neighborhood more than once, and although he never, to her knowledge, spoke to Milly or came to the house, she saw that Milly sometimes looked unusually agitated and distressed. It was gradually borne in upon Lettice's mind that she had better learn a little more of the girl's story, for her own sake; and coming upon her one day with the signs of trouble plainly written on her face, Lettice could not forbear to speak.

Milly was sitting in a little dressing-room, with some needlework in her hand. The baby was sleeping in a cradle at her side. She sprang up when Lettice entered; but Lettice made her sit down again, and then sat down as well.

"What is it, Milly? Is there anything wrong that I don't know of? Come, don't give way. I want to help you, but how can I do that unless you tell me everything?"

"There is nothing to tell except what you know," said Milly, making an effort to command herself. "But, sometimes, when I think of it all, I can't help giving way. I did not mean you to see it though, miss."

"I have never asked you any questions, Milly, about all that happened after you left me, and I do not want to know more than you wish to tell me. But don't you think I might do something to place matters on a better footing, if I knew your circumstances a little better?"

"Oh, I could never—never tell you all!" said Milly hiding her face.

"Don't tell me all then. You have called yourself Mrs. Beadon so far. You have heard nothing of Mr. Beadon lately except what you told me the other day?"

"Only what Mr. Johnson said." Milly averted her head and looked at her child. "The name," she went on in a low voice, "the name—is not—not Beadon."

"Never mind the name. Perhaps it is as well that you should not tell me. When did you see him last?"

"In May."

"Never since May?"

"Not once." Milly hung her head and played with the ring on her finger. "He does not want to see me again!" she broke out almost bitterly.

"Perhaps it is better for you both that he should not. But I will not ask any more," said Lettice. "I can understand that it must be very painful, either to tell me your story or to conceal it."

"I hate to conceal it from you!" Milly said passionately. "Oh, I wish I had never seen him, and never listened to him! Yet it was my fault—I have nobody to blame but myself. I have never forgiven myself for deceiving you so!"

"Ah, if that were the worst, there would not be much to grieve about!"

"I almost think it is the worst. Miss Lettice, may I really tell you my story—all, at least, that it would be right for you to hear?"

"If you would like to tell me, do! Perhaps I can help you in some way when I know more."

"There are some things I should like you to understand," said Milly, hesitatingly, "though not because it will take away the blame from me—nothing can do that. When I first knew Mr. Beadon (I'll call him so, please), I was very giddy and foolish. I longed to see the world, and thought that all would go well with me then. I don't know where I picked up the idea, but I had read stories about beautiful women who had had wonderful good fortune, through nothing at all but their looks—and people had told me I was beautiful—and I was silly enough to think that I could do great things, as well as those I had read about. I suppose they must have been very clever and witty—or, perhaps, they had more luck. I wanted to be free and independent; and I am afraid I was ready to listen to any one who would flatter my vanity, as—as Mr. Beadon did."

"When did he first begin to say these things to you? Was it after you came to London?"

"Yes—not long after. He was above me in station, and very handsome, and proud; and when he began to speak to me, though I was all the time afraid of him, and uneasy when I spoke to him, my head was fairly turned.

It shows I was not meant to shine in the world, or I should not have been so uneasy when I spoke to him. For some time he said nothing out of the way—only kind words and flattery; but when he found what I had set my heart on, he was always telling me that I was fit to be a great lady, and to make a noise in the world. That set me all on fire, and I could not rest for thinking of what I might do if I could only find my way into society. It makes me mad to remember what a fool I was!

"But I was not quite bad, Miss Lettice. When he said that he would give me what I wanted—make me a lady, and all the rest of it—I shrank from doing what I knew to be wrong; or perhaps I was only afraid. At any rate, I would not listen to him. Then he declared that he loved me too well to let me go—and he asked me to be his wife."

"Oh!" said Lettice. It was an involuntary sound, and Milly scarcely heard it.

"If you knew," she said, "what a proud and dignified gentleman he was, you would laugh at me thinking that he really meant what he said, and believing that he would keep his word. But I did believe it, and I agreed at length to leave you and go away with him."

"Did you think that I should have anything to say against your marriage, Milly?" said Lettice, mournfully.

"I—I thought you might. And Mr. Beadon asked me not to mention it."

"Well!—and so you trusted him. And then, poor girl, your dream soon came to an end?"

"Not very soon. He kept his word——"

"What?"

"He married me, on the day when I left you. Not in a church, but somewhere—in Fulham, I think. It looked like a private house, but he said it was a registrar's. Oh, Miss Campion, are you ill?"

Lettice was holding her side. She had turned white, and her heart was throbbing painfully; but she soon overcame the feeling or at least concealed it.

"No. Go on—go on! He married you!"

"And we went on the Continent together. I was very happy for a time, so long as he seemed happy; but I could never shake off that uncomfortable fear in his presence. After a while we came back to London, and then I had to live alone, which of course I did not like. He had taken very nice rooms for me at Hampstead, where he used to come now and then; and he offered to bring some friends to visit me; but I did not want him to do that—I cared for nobody but him!"

"Poor Milly!" said Lettice, softly.

"I had been suspicious and uneasy for some time, especially when he told me I had better go to Birchmead and stay with my grandmother, as he was too busy to come and see me, and the rooms at Hampstead were expensive. So I went to Birchmead and told them that Mr. Beadon was abroad. He was not—he was in London—and I went up to see him every now and then; but I wanted to put the best face on everything. It would have been too hard to tell my grandmother that I did not think he cared for me."

She stopped and wiped the tears away from her eyes.

"There was worse than that," she said. "I began to believe that I was not his lawful wife, or he would not behave to me as he did. But I daren't ask, I was so afraid of him. And I felt as if I could not leave him, even if I was not his wife. That's where the badness of me came out, you see, Miss Lettice. I would have stayed with him to the end of my days, wife or no wife, if he had wanted me. But he tired of me very soon."

"Did he tell you so, Milly?"

"He wrote to me to go back to the Hampstead rooms, miss. And I thought that everything was going to be right between us. I had something to tell him which I thought would please him; and I hoped—I hoped—even if things had not been quite right about the marriage—that he would put them straight before my baby came. For the child's sake I thought maybe he wouldn't give me up. I had been dreadfully afraid; but when he sent for me to London again, I thought that he loved me still, and that we were going to have a happy time together.

"So I went to Hampstead; but he was not there. He sent his clerk instead—the man you saw me walking with the other day. And he told me that Mr.——Beadon did not wish to see me again, that I had been deceived by the mock-marriage, and that he sent me twenty pounds, and I might have more by writing to his clerk. Not to him! I was never to see him or speak to him again."

"And what did you do then, Milly?"

"It was very hard for me. I fainted, and when I came to myself Mr. Johnson was gone, and the money was stuffed into my pocket. Perhaps it was mean of me to keep it, but I hadn't the heart or the spirit to send it back. I did not know what I should do without it, for I hadn't a penny of my own. I stayed for a little time at the Hampstead lodgings, but the landlady got an idea of the true state of things and abused me shamefully one day for having come into her house; so I was forced to go. I don't know what I should have done if I hadn't met Mr. Johnson in the street. He was really kind, though he doesn't look as if he would be. He told me of nice cheap lodgings, and of some one who would look after me; and he offered me money, but I wouldn't take it."

"How long did your money last?"

"It was all gone before baby came. I lived on the dresses and presents that Mr. Beadon had given me. I heard nothing from Birchmead—I did not know that my grandmother was dead, and I used to think sometimes that I would go to her; but I did not dare. I knew that it would break her heart to see me as I was."

"Poor girl!" said Lettice again, below her breath.

"You must despise me!" cried Milly, bursting into tears. "And you would despise me still more—if I told you—everything."

"No, Milly, it is not for me to despise you. I am very, very sorry for you. You have suffered a great deal, for what was not all your fault."

"Yes, I *have* suffered, Miss Lettice—more than I can tell you. I had a terrible time when my baby was born. I had a fever too, and lost my hair; and when I recovered I had nothing left. I did not know what to do. I thought of throwing myself into the river; and I think I should have done it when I came to Birchmead and found that grandmother was dead, if it had not been for you. You found me in the garden that night, just as I had made up my mind. There's a place across the meadows where one could easily get into a deep pool under the river-bank, and never come out again. That was where I meant to go."

"No wonder you have looked so ill and worn," said Lettice, compassionately. "What you must have endured before you brought yourself to that! Well, it is all over now, and you must live for the future. Put the past behind you; forget it—think of it only with sorrow for your mistakes, and a determination to use them so that your child shall be better guarded than you have been. You and your baby have your own lives to live—good and useful lives they may be yet. No one would blame you if they knew your story, and there is no reason why you should be afraid. I will always be your friend, Milly, if you will work and strive—it is the only way in which you can regain and keep your self-respect."

Milly bent her head and kissed Lettice's hand with another outburst of tears. But they were tears of gratitude, and Lettice did not try to check them now.

Whilst they were still sitting thus, side by side, the servant knocked at the door with a message for her mistress; and her voice broke strangely through the sympathetic silence that had been for some time maintained between mistress and maid.

"Mr. Campion wishes to see you, ma'am."

Lettice felt the face which still rested on her hand flush with sudden heat; but when Milly raised it it was as white as snow. The baby in its cradle stirred and began to wake.

"I will come at once, Mrs. Jermy," said Lettice. "Milly, you had better finish your work here, and let me give baby to Mrs. Jermy for a few minutes. She will be quite good if I take her downstairs."

She did not look at Milly as she spoke; or, if she did, she paid no heed to the mute pain and deprecation in the mother's eyes. Folding the baby in the white shawl that had covered it, she took it in her arms, and with slow, almost reluctant steps, went down to meet her brother.

Sydney had come upon what he felt to be a painful errand.

Although the session had begun, and the House of Commons was already hard at work on a vain attempt to thresh out the question of Parliamentary Procedure, he was not yet able to devote himself to the urgent affairs of the nation, or to seek an opening for that eloquent and fiery speech which he had elaborated in the intervals of his autumn rest. Before he could set his mind to these things there was an equally urgent question of domestic procedure which it was necessary for him to arrange—a question for which he had been more or less prepared ever since he heard of the flight of Lettice from Florence, but which had assumed the gravest possible importance within the last few hours.

A terrible and incredible thing had come to the knowledge of Sydney Campion. That morning he had looked in at his chambers in the Temple, and he had found there, amongst other letters, one written about three weeks before by Cora Walcott, which had made his blood run cold.

> "SIR,"—the letter ran—"you were just and bold on that day when you vindicated my character in the Criminal Court, and procured a well-deserved punishment for the husband who had outraged me. Therefore it is that I write to give you warning, and to tell you that the man Walcott, discharged from prison, has been secretly conveyed away by one whom you know, after I had been deceived in a most shameful manner with a story of his death in prison. I saw her on the day before his release—her and his child—waiting to appropriate him, and like an idiot I believed her lies. I know not where they hide together, but . . . . I seek until I find. If you know, take my advice, and separate them. I go prepared. You proved last time that my husband stabbed me. That was very clever on your part; but you will not be able to prove the like thing again, if I should meet my husband and your sister together.
>
> "CORA WALCOTT."

This letter had exasperated Sydney beyond endurance. He did not know Lettice's address; but, thinking it possi- that Mrs. Graham migh have it, he went the same afternoon to Edwardes Square. Clara, being at home, was able, though in some trepidation, to tell him what he wanted; and thus it was that he found himself at Bute Lodge.

Lettice came into the room where he had been waiting, intrepid, and yet boding something which could not be entirely pleasant for him, and might be very much the reverse. She did not want to quarrel with Sydney—she had made many efforts in the past to please him, without much effect, and had been pained by the increasing interval which separated them from each other. But she believed that to earn his good word would imply the forsaking of nearly all that she valued, and the bowing down to images which she could not respect; and therefore she was content that his good word should be a thing beyond her reach.

She carried the baby on her left arm, and held out her right to Sydney. He barely touched her fingers.

"You are back again," she said. "I hope you had a pleasant time, and that your wife is well."

"She is pretty well, thank you. We should have gone on to Florence if you had remained there, as we expected. You have taken your fate in your hands, Lettice, and cut yourself adrift from those who care for you!"

"Not willingly, Sydney. You might believe that at every step I have done what seemed to be my duty."

"How can one believe that? I only wish I could. Read this letter!"

She looked at him first, and her eyes flashed at his expression of unbelief. She drew herself up as she took Cora's letter in her hands, and read it through with a curl of contempt upon her lips. Then she dropped the paper, and, clasping Milly's child to her breast, looked long and steadily at her brother.

"Why did you give me that to read?" she said quietly.

"There could be only one reason," he replied; "to ask you if it is true?"

"You *ask* me? You expect an answer?"

"I don't see why you should object to say 'yes' or 'no' to a charge which, if true, must destroy all brotherly and sisterly feeling between us."

"But you *are* my brother! Ask me your own questions, and I will answer. I will not answer that woman's!"

She stood in front of him, by far the more proud and dignified of the two, and waited for him to begin.

"Did you bring that man with you here from the prison?"

"I brought Mr. Walcott here."

"And is he here now?"

"Yes."

"What more is there to be said? Wretched woman, it is well for you that your parents are beyond the reach of this disgrace!"

Whether he meant it or not, he pointed, as he spoke, to the infant in her arms.

Lettice heard a step outside. She went to the door, and spoke in a low voice to Mrs. Jermy. Then she came back again, and said,

"What do you mean, Sydney, by 'this disgrace'?"

"Can you say one word to palliate what you have already admitted? Can you deny the facts which speak for themselves? Great Heaven! that such a shameful thing should fall upon us! The name of Campion has indeed been dragged through the mire of calumny, but never until now has so dark a stain been cast upon it!"

Theatrical in his words, Sydney was even more theatrical in his action. He stood on the hearthrug, raised his hands in horror, and bowed his head in grief and self-pity.

"You pointed at the child just now," said Lettice, steadily; "what do you mean by that?"

"Do not ask me what I mean. Is not its very existence an indelible disgrace?"

"Perhaps it is," she said, kissing the little face which was blinking and smiling at her. "But to whom?"

"To whom!" Sydney cried, with more of real indignation and anger in his voice. "To its miserable mother—to its unscrupulous and villainous father!"

Lettice's keen ears caught the sound of light and hesitating footsteps in the passage outside. She opened the door quickly, and drew in the unfortunate Milly.

Sydney started back, and leaned for support upon the mantelpiece behind him. His face turned white to the very lips.

"Milly," said the remorseless Lettice, "tell Mr. Campion who is the father of this child!"

The poor mother who had been looking at her mistress in mute appeal, turned her timid eyes on Sydney's face, then sank upon the floor in an agony of unrestrained weeping.

Except for that sound of passionate weeping, there was complete silence in the room for two or three minutes, whilst Sydney's better and worse self strove together for the mastery.

"Milly!" he ejaculated at last, in a hoarse undertone, "I did not know! Good God, I did not know." Then, to his sister—"Leave us alone."

So Lettice went out, but before she went she saw him stride across the floor to Milly and bend above her as if to raise and perhaps to comfort her. He did not ask to see his sister again. In a short ten minutes, she saw him walking hastily across the Common to the station, and she noticed that his head was bent, and that the spring, the confidence of his usual gait and manner had deserted him. Milly locked herself with her baby in her room, and sobbed until she was quieted by sheer exhaustion.

But there was on her face next day a look of peace and quietude which Lettice had never seen before. She said not a word about her interview, and Lettice never knew what had passed between her brother and the woman whom he had wronged. But she thought sometimes, in after years, that the extreme of self-abasement in man or woman may prove, to natures not radically bad or hopelessly weak, a turning-point from which to date their best and most persistent efforts.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"COURAGE!"

THE reawakening of Alan's mind to old tastes and old pursuits, though fitful in the first instance, soon developed into a steady appetite for work. Much of his former freshness and elasticity returned; ideas and forms of expression recurred to him without trouble. He had seized on a dramatic theme suggested in one of the books which Lettice had been reading, and a few days later admitted to her that he was at work on a poetic drama. She clapped her hands in almost childlike glee at the news, and Alan, without much need for pressing, read to her a whole scene which had passed from the phase of thought into written words.

Lettice had already occupied her mornings in writing the story which she had promised to Mr. MacAlpine. Fortunately for her, she now found little difficulty in taking up the threads of the romance which she had begun at Florence. The change of feeling and circumstance which had taken place in her own heart she transferred, with due reservation and appropriate coloring, to the characters in her story, which thus became as real to her in the London fog as it had been under the fleckless Tuscan sky.

So long as Alan was out of health and listless, it was not easy for her to apply herself to this regular morning work. But now that he was fast recovering his spirit and energy, and was busy with work of his own, she could settle down to her writing with a quiet mind.

Alan had not accepted the hospitality of Lettice without concern or protest, and, of course, he had no idea of letting her be at the expense of finding food and house-rent for him.

"Why do you not bring me the weekly bills?" he said, with masculine bluntness, after he had been at Chiswick for nearly three weeks.

She looked at him with a pained expression, and did not answer.

"You don't think that I can live on you in this cool way much longer? You are vexed with me! Do not be vexed—do not think that I value what you have done for me according to a wretched standard of money. If I pay everything, instead of you, I shall be far more grateful, and more truly in your debt."

"But think of my feelings, too!" she said. "I have had my own way so far, because you could not help it. If you are going to be unkind and tyrannical as soon as you get well, I shall find it in my heart to be almost sorry. Do not let money considerations come in! You promised that you would not say anything of the kind before the end of the month."

"I promised something; but I don't think I am breaking my promise in spirit. Look here; I have not been in retreat for six months without a certain benefit in the way of economy. Here's a cheque for a hundred pounds. I want you to get it cashed, and to use it."

"I have plenty of money," Lettice said, patting impatiently with her foot on the floor. "I cannot take this; and until the month is out I will not talk about any kind of business whatsoever. There, sir!"

Alan did not want to annoy her, and let the subject drop for the time.

"You shall have your way in all things, except that one," he said; "but I will not mention it again until you give me leave."

The truth is that Lettice did not know what was to happen at the end of the month, or whenever her tenancy of Bute Lodge might be concluded. How was she to leave Alan, or to turn him out of doors, when the object of her receiving him should have been accomplished? Was it already fully accomplished? He had been saved from despair, and from the danger of a physical relapse; was he now independent of anything she could do for him? It gave her a pang to think of that possibility, but she would have to think of it and to act upon it very soon. She could not put off the evil day much beyond the end of November; before Christmas they must come to an understanding—nay, she must come to an understanding with her own heart; for did not everything depend on her firmness and resolution?

Not everything! Though she did not know it, Alan was thinking for her just what she could not think for herself. He could not fail to see that Lettice had staked her reputation to do as she had done for him. As his perception grew more keen, he saw with increasing clearness. A man just recovering from serious illness will accept sacrifices from his friends with little or no demur, which in full health he would not willingly permit. Alan could not have saved Lettice from the consequences of her own act, even if he had realized its significance from the first—which he did not. But now he knew that she was giving more as a woman than he, as a man, had ever thought of taking from her; and he also, with a somewhat heavy heart, perceived that a change in their relations to one another was drawing near.

Lettice was sitting in her little study one morning, turning over in her mind the question which so deeply agitated her, and trying to think that she was prepared for the only solution which appeared to be possible or acceptable. Alan and she were to go their separate ways: that was, she told herself, the one thing fixed and unalterable. They might meet again as friends, and give each other help and sympathy; but it was their irrevocable doom that they should live apart and alone. That which her heart had sanctioned hitherto, it would sanction no longer; the cause and the justification were gone, and so were the courage and the confidence.

Lettice had appropriated to her own use as a study a little room on the ground floor, opening upon the garden. In warm weather it was a particularly charming place, for the long windows then always stood open, and pleasant scents and sounds from the flower-beds and leafy trees stole in to cheer her solitude. In winter, it was a little more difficult to keep the rooms warm and cosy; but Lettice was one of the women who have the knack of making any place where they abide look home-like and inviting, and in this case her skill had not been spent in vain, even upon a room for the furniture of which she was not altogether responsible. Heavy tapestry curtains excluded the draught; a soft rug lay before the old-fashioned high brass fender, and a bright fire burned in the grate. Lettice's writing-table and library chair half filled the room; but there was also a small table heaped high with books and papers, a large padded leather easy-chair, and a book-case. The walls were distempered in a soft reddish hue, and such part of the floor as was not covered with a bordered tapestry carpet of divers tints had been stained dark brown. One of Lettice's favorite possessions, a large autotype of the Sistine Madonna, hung on the wall fronting her writing-table, so that she could see it in the pauses of her work.

It was at the door of this room that Alan knocked one stormy December day. The month which Lettice had fixed as the period of silence about business affairs had passed by; but Alan was so very far from strong when November ended that she had managed, by persuasion and insistence, to defer any new and definite arrangement for at least another fortnight. But he had gained much physical and mental strength during those two weeks, and he had felt more and more convinced from day to day that between himself and Lettice there must now be a complete understanding. He knew that she had taken the house until the end of December; after that date she would be homeless, like himself. What were they both to do? It was the question which he had come to put.

Lettice received him with a touch of surprise, almost of embarrassment in her manner. She had never made him free of her study, for she felt it better that each should have a separate domain for separate work and a separate life. She had no wish to break down more barriers than circumstances demanded; and the fact that she had utterly outraged the laws of conventionality in the eyes of the world did not absolve her from the delicate reticence which she had always maintained in her personal relations with Alan. He saw the doubt in her face, and hastened to apologize for his intrusion. "But I could not work this morning," he said, "and I wanted to speak to you. Milly told me you were here, and——"

"Oh, I am very glad to see you. Come and sit down."

"You are not too busy for a little talk?"

"Not at all."

She wheeled the leather-covered chair a little nearer to the fire, and made him sit down on it. He cast his eye round the cheery room, noting the books and papers that she was using, the evidences of steady work and thought. The firelight leaped and glanced on the ruddy walls, and the coals crackled in the grate; a dash of rain against the window, a blast of wind in the distance, emphasized the contrast between the warmth and light and restfulness within the house, the coldness and the storm without.

Alan held his hands to the blaze, and listened for a moment to the wind before he spoke.

"One does not feel inclined," he said, "to turn out on such a day as this."

"Happily, you have no need to turn out," Lettice answered, taking his words in their most literal sense.

"Not to day, perhaps; but very soon. Lettice, the time has come when we must decide on our next step. I cannot stay here any longer—on our present terms, at least. But I have not come to say good-bye. Is there any reason why I should say good-bye—save for a time?"

He had risen from his chair as he spoke, and was standing before her. Lettice shaded her eyes with her hands. Ah, if she could only give way to the temptation which she felt vaguely aware that he was going to raise! If she could only be weak in spite of her resolution to be strong, if she could only take to herself at once the one consolation and partnership which would satisfy her soul, how instantly would her depression pass away! How easily with one word could she change the whole current and complexion of life for the man who was bending over her! He was still only half-redeemed from ruin; he might fall a prey to despair again, if she shrank in the supreme moment from the sacrifice demanded of her.

Alan did not know how her heart was pleading for him. Something, indeed, he divined, as he saw her trembling and shaken by the strife within. His heart bounded with sudden impulse from every quickened vein, and his lips drew closer to her hidden face.

"Lettice!"

There was infinite force and tenderness in the whispered word, and it pierced her to the quick. She dropped her hands, and looked up.

But one responsive word or glance, and he would have taken her in his arms. He understood her face, her eyes, too well to do it. She gave him no consent; if he kissed her, if he pressed her to his breast, he felt that he should dominate her body only, not her soul. And he was not of that coarse fibre which could be satisfied so. If Lettice did not give herself to him willingly, she must not give herself at all.

"Lettice!" he said again, and there was less passion but more entreaty in his tone than before he met that warning glance, "will you not let me speak?"

"Is there anything for us to say," she asked, very gently, "except *good-bye?*"

"Would you turn me away into the cold from the warmth and brightness of your home, Lettice? Don't be angry with me for saying so. I have had very little joy or comfort in my life of late, and it is to you that I owe all that I know of consolation. You have rescued me from a very hell of despair and darkness, and brought me into paradise. Now do you bid me go? Lettice, it would be cruel. Tell me to stay with you . . . . and to the last hour of my life I will stay."

He was standing beside her, with one hand on the wooden arm of her circular chair. She put her hand over his fingers almost caressingly, and looked up at him again, with tears in her sweet eyes.

"Have I not done what I wanted to do?" she said. "I found you weak, friendless, ill; you have got back your strength, and you know that you have at least one friend who will be faithful to you. My task is done; you must go away now and fight the world—for my sake."

"For your sake? You care what I do, then: Lettice, you care for me? Tell me that you love me—tell me, at last!"

She was silent for a moment, and he felt that the hand which rested on his own fluttered as if it would take itself away. Was she offended? Would she withdraw the mute caress of that soft pressure? Breathlessly he waited. If she took her hand away, he thought that he should almost cease to hope.

But the hand settled once more into its place. It even tightened its pressure upon his fingers as she replied—

"I love you with all my heart," she said; "and it is just because I love you that I want you to go away."

With a quick turn of his wrist he seized the hand that had hitherto lain on his, and carried it to his lips. They looked into each other's eyes with the long silent look which is more expressive even than a kiss. Soul draws very near to soul when the eyes of man and woman meet as theirs met then. The lips did not meet, but Alan's face was very close to hers. When the pause had lasted so long that Lettice's eyelids drooped, and the spell of the look was broken, he spoke again.

"Why should I go away? Why should the phantom of a dead past divide us? We belong to one another, you and I. Think of what life might mean to us, side by side, hand in hand, working, striving together, you, the stronger, giving me some of your strength, I ready to give you the love you need—the love you have craved for—the love that you have won! Lettice, Lettice, neither God nor man can divide us now!"

"Hush! you are talking wildly," she answered, in a very gentle tone. "Listen to me, Alan. There is one point in which you are wrong. You speak of a dead past. But the past is not dead, it lives for you still in the person of—your wife."

"And you think that she should stand in our way? After all that she has done? Can any law, human or divine, bind me to her now? Surely her own acts have set me free. Lettice, my darling, do not be blinded by conventional views of right and wrong. I know that if we had loved each other and she had been a woman of blameless life, I should not be justified in asking you to sacrifice for me all that the world holds dear; but think of the life she has led—the shame she has brought upon me and upon herself. Good God! is anyone in the world narrow-minded enough and base enough to think that I can still be bound to her?"

"No, Alan; but your course is clear. You must set yourself free."

"Seek my remedy in the courts? Have all the miserable story bandied about from lip to lip, be branded as a wretched dupe of a wicked woman on whom he had already tried to revenge himself? That is what the world would say. And your name would be brought forward, my dearest; it would be hopeless to keep it in the background now. Your very goodness and sweetness would be made the basis of an accusation. . . . I could not bear it, I could not see you pilloried, even if I could bear the shame of it myself."

He sank on his knees beside her, and let his head sink almost to her shoulder. She felt that he trembled, she saw that his lips were pale, and that the dew stood on his forehead. His physical strength had not yet returned in full measure, and the contest with Lettice was trying it to the utmost.

Lettice had turned pale too, but she spoke even more firmly than before.

"Alan," she said, "is this brave?"

"Brave? no!" he answered her. "I might be brave for myself, but how can I be brave for you? You will suffer more than you have any conception of, when you are held up to the scorn—the loathing—of the world. For you know she will not keep to the truth—she will spit her venom upon you—she will blacken your character in ways that you do not dream——"

"I think I have fathomed the depths," said Lettice, with a faint, wan smile. "I saw her myself when you were in prison, and she has written to my brother Sydney. Oh, yes," as he lifted his face and looked at her, "she stormed, she threatened, she has accused . . . what does it matter to me what she says, or what the world says, either? Alan, it is too late to care so much for name and fame. I crossed the line which marks the boundary between convention and true liberty many weeks ago. The best thing for me now, as well as for you, is to face our accusers gallantly, and have the matter exposed to the light of day."

"I have brought this upon you!" he groaned.

"No, I have brought it on myself. Dear Alan, it is the hardest thing in the world to be brave for those we love—we are much too apt to fear danger or pain for them. Just because it is so hard, I ask you to do this thing. Give me courage—don't sap my confidence with doubts and fears. Let us be brave together, and for one another, and then we shall win the battle and be at peace."

"It will be so hard for you."

"Not harder than it has been for you these many years. My poor dear, my heart has bled so many times to think how you have suffered! I am proud to have a share in your suffering now. I am not ashamed to tell you that I love you, for it is my love that is to make you strong and brave, so that we may conquer the world together, despise its scorn, and meet its sneers with smiles! We will not run away from it, like cowards! I come of a fighting race on my mother's side, the very suggestion of flight makes my blood boil, Alan! No, we will die fighting, if need be, but we will not run away."

"Yes, yes, my brave darling, you are right. We will stand or fall together. It was not for myself that I hesitated."

"I know—I know. So you see, dear, that we must part."

"For a time only."

"You will see Mr. Larmer to-morrow?"

"I will."

They were silent for a while. Her arm was round his neck, and his head was resting against her wearily. It was Lettice who first roused herself.

"This must not be," she said, drawing back her arm. "Alan, let us be friends still—and nothing else. Let us have nothing to reproach ourselves with by and by."

He sighed as he lifted his head from its resting place.

"I will go to Larmer to-day," he said. "There is nothing to be gained by waiting. But—have you thought of all that that woman may do to us? Lettice, I tremble almost for your life."

"I do not think she would attempt that."

"She threatened you?"

"With vitriol. She said that she would blind me so that I could not see you—scar me so that you would not care to look upon my face. Ought I to have told you? Alan, do not look so pale! It was a mere foolish threat.'

"I am not so sure of that. She is capable of it—or of any other fiendish act. If she injured you, Lettice——"

"Don't think of that. You say you will go to Mr. Larmer this afternoon."

"Yes. And then I will look out for lodgings. And you—what will you do? Stay here?"

She shook her head. "I shall go into lodgings too. I have plenty of work, and you—you will come to see me sometimes."

"As often as you will let me. Oh, Lettice, it is a hard piece of work that you have given me to do!"

She took his hand in hers and pressed it softly. "I shall be grateful to you for doing it," she said.

There was a long silence. Alan stood by the fire-place, his head resting upon his hand. Finally he spoke in a low uncertain tone—

"There is one point I must mention. I think there may be a difficulty in getting the divorce. I believe she claims that I condoned her—her faults. I may find insuperable obstacles in my way."

Lettice drew a quick breath, and rose suddenly to her feet.

"We have nothing to do with that just now, Alan. You must try."

And then they said no more.

But when the afternoon came and Alan was ready to depart—for when once he had made up his mind that he must go, he thought it better not to linger—he drew Lettice inside her little study again, and looked her full in the face.

"Lettice, before I go, will you kiss me once?"

She did not hesitate. She lifted her face, calmly and seriously, and kissed him on the mouth.

But she was not prepared for the grip in which he seized her, and the passionate pressure of her lips which he returned. "Lettice, my dearest, my own love," he said, holding her close to him as he spoke, "suppose I fail! If the law will not set me free, what will you do?"

She was silent for a minute or two, and he saw that her face grew pale.

"Oh," she said at last, in a sighing voice, broken at last by a despairing sob, "if man's law is so hard, Alan, surely then we may trust ourselves to God's!"

'Promise me," he said, "that you will never give me up—that, whatever happens, you will one day be mine!"

"Whatever happens," she answered, "I am yours, Alan, in life or death—in time and for eternity."

And with this assurance he was fain to be content.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SYDNEY PAYS HIS DEBTS.

THE fight which Sydney Campion had had to wage with his creditors was bitter enough up to the time of his marriage. Then there had been a lull for a few months, during which it was confidently said and believed that he was about to touch a large sum of money, and that all who had put their trust in him would be rewarded.

Month after month went by, and there was no realization of the prospect. Sydney touched no money but what he earned. He might, no doubt, have touched some of his wife's money, even for the payment of his old debts, if he had told her the distress that he was in. But it had never occurred to him to be thus sincere with Nan. He had thought to figure before her as one who was not dependent on her fortune, who could very comfortably play with his hundreds, though not able, like herself, to be generous with thousands. He would, in fact, have been ashamed to own his rotten financial condition, either to Nan or to any of his social or political friends ; and he fancied that he was concealing this condition in a very ingenious manner when he made a liberal outlay in connection with their quiet marriage, the honeymoon abroad, and the subsequent arrangements of their household in London.

This was all the more unfortunate because Nan, just of age, with her fortune in her own hands, would have given him anything without demur or question, if she had for a moment suspected that he needed it. His concealment was so effectual that it never entered her unsophisticated mind that this barrister in good practice, this rising politician, who seemed to have his feet on the ladder of success, could be crushed and burdened with debt. Sydney, howover, was by no means blind. He knew well enough that he could have had the few thousands necessary to clear him if he had asked his wife for a cheque ; but he did not trust her love sufficiently to believe that she would think as well of him from that day forward as she had done before, and he was not large-minded enough to conceive himself as ever shaking off the sense of obligation which her gift in such a form would impose upon him.

He had therefore drifted, in the matter of his debts, from expedient to expedient, in the hope that by good fortune and good management he might avoid the rocks that beset his course, and reach smooth water by his own exertion. But, as ill luck would have it, he had given a bill for six hundred pounds, due on the 23rd of November, to a certain Mr. Copley, a man who had been especially disgusted by Sydney's failure to obtain ready money at the time of his marriage, and who for this and other reasons had worked himself up into a malicious frame of mind. But on the 23rd of November, Sydney and his wife had run over to Paris for a few days with Sir John and Lady Pynsent, and then Nan had been so seriously indisposed that Sydney could not leave her without seeming unkindness; so that they did not reach London again until the 26th. This delay opened a chapter of incidents which ended as Sydney had not foreseen.

He had not forgotten the date of the bill, and knew that it was important to provide for it; but he did not anticipate that the last day of grace would have expired before he could communicate with the man who held his signature.

Early on the morning of the 27th, he set out for Mr. Copley's office; and it so happened that at the same moment Mr. Copley set out also for Sydney's private house.

"Master in?" said Mr. Copley, who was a man of few words.

"No, sir."

"Lady in?"

"My mistress does not receive any one so early."

"Take that up—answer important—bearer waiting."

The footman condescended so far as this, and gave Mr. Copley's letter into the charge of Mrs. Campion's maid.

In less than ten minutes Nan sent for the unwelcome visitor. She was very pale when she received him, and she looked so young and fair that Mr. Copley was a little taken aback. He knew that Sydney had married an heiress, and it was from her, therefore, that he had determined, if possible, to get the money; but he half repented his resolve when he saw Mrs. Campion's face. "Too young to know anything about business," he said to himself.

But Nan was more business-like than he expected. She had for some time insisted on knowing a good deal about her own money matters, and she was well aware of her powers.

"Where is this paper—this acceptance you mention in your letter?" she began.

Mr. Copley silently took it from his notebook, and laid it on the table.

"Why did you bring this here? or, rather, why did you send it in to me? Mr. Campion is not difficult to find when he is wanted. This is, of course, *his* business." There was a little indignation in her tone.

"Beg your pardon, madam. You will observe the date of the acceptance. I presented it yesterday."

"At the bank?"

"Yes."

Nan bit her lip. She knew what this signified, and she would have given a thousand pounds to undo what had happened.

She went to a drawer in her writing-table and quietly took out a cheque-book. "We were delayed in returning to England by my illness," she said, as indifferently as she could. "Mr. Campion has gone out for the purpose of seeing to this." Her heart smote her for making a statement which she could not vouch for, but as Mr. Copley only bowed and looked uninterested, she went on rapidly, "As you have the paper with you, it will save time—it will be satisfactory, I suppose—if I give you a cheque for it?"

"Amply satisfactory."

She sat down before the table and took the pen in her hand, hesitating a moment as to whether she ought to ask for further details. Her fears and her curiosity were alike aroused, and Mr. Copley divined the question, which she hardly knew how to put into words. He produced a sheet of notepaper, containing a few memoranda, and passed it across the table.

"That was to refresh my memory if necessary; but happily it isn't. Mr. Campion may like to see it, however. He will find it is all correct. I knew I was right in asking to see you, ma'am."

Nan did not look at the memoranda. She was satisfied that she had the details before her for her own or Sydney's consideration if necessary. She signed her cheque and took possession of the dishonored bill; and then Mr. Copley departed.

When he was gone, she caught up the sheet of paper and hastily glanced at it.

"1880—studs, pin, money advanced £50. 1881—ring, money advanced £100; bracelet, necklace, pendant, money advanced £150——" and so on. Further down the page, Nan's eye was caught by the words: "Diamond and sapphire ring."

"Ah!" she said, catching her breath as if she were in pain, and laying the paper down on the table, "*that* was mine!"

The ring was on her finger as she spoke. It had been her engagement ring. She looked at it for a minute or two, then slowly took it off and put it into the drawer.

Next, with an absent look upon her face, she took up a small taper, and lighted it; and, holding Mr. Copley's paper by one corner, she raised it to the flame and converted it into ashes. One line escaped. A fragment of the paper was scorched but not consumed, and as she took it up to make her work more thorough, the words and a date caught her attention once again.

"Bracelet, necklace, pendant, bought after we knew each other," she murmured with a curious smile. "Those were *not* for me. I wonder——"

But she did not go on. It was the first time that a shadow from Sydney's past had crossed her life; and she dared not investigate it too closely. She put the bill and her cheque-book out of sight, and sat down to think over the present position of affairs.

Sydney came home just before lunch-time, and, hearing that she was in her own little sitting-room (she would not have it called a boudoir), went up to her. He looked vexed and anxious, as Nan was quick to notice, but he came up to her side and kissed her affectionately.

"Better, Nan?" She had not been very well when he left her: indeed, the delicacy of her health had lately been more marked, and had several times given him cause for uneasiness.

"Yes, thank you. But you don't look well, Sydney."

She hoped that he would tell her what was wrong. To her disappointment, he smiled, and answered lightly.

"I'm all right, Nan. I have a good deal to do just now, and am rather tired—that is all."

"Tired—and anxious?" she said, looking at him with more keenness than he had thought her soft eyes capable of expressing.

"Anxious! no, I have not much to be anxious about, have I?"

He spoke with a laugh; but, to her fancy, there was something half-alarmed and half-defiant in the pose of his lifted head, the glance of his handsome bright eyes. Her heart sank a little: it seemed to her that it would have been nobler in her husband to tell her the whole truth, and it had never occurred to her before to think of him as ignoble in any way.

"I suppose you do not want to tell me for fear of troubling me," she said, with a tremor in her voice; "but I think I know what you are anxious about, Sydney."

He gave a little start as he turned towards her.

"Some man has been here whilst you were out, and he sent up this letter with a request that it should be opened. Look!" she said, giving him the bill, "you can tear it up now. I was sure you had gone out to see about it, but I thought it better that I should settle it at once. I hope" —with a little girlish nervousness—"you don't mind?"

He had sat down on a chair when she showed him Mr. Copley's letter, with the look of a man determined to bear a blow, but he sprang up again at the sight of his dishonored acceptance.

"And you have paid it, Nan?" he cried.

"Yes, I paid it. Oh, Sydney, it was a little thing to do! If only you had told me months ago!"

Her eyes brimmed over with tears at last. She had been smarting under a sense of terrible humiliation ever since Mr. Copley's visit, but hitherto she had not wept. Now, when her husband took her in his arms and looked into her eyes, the pain at her heart was somewhat assuaged, although the tears fell swiftly down her pale cheeks.

"Nan, I never dreamed that I should find your kindness so bitter to me," Sydney said.

He was profoundly moved by her gentleness and by her generosity alike. But inasmuch as it requires more generosity of nature to accept a gift nobly than to make it, he felt himself shamed in her eyes, and his wife was in her turn pained by the consciousness of his shame.

"Why should you be afraid to trust me?" she said. "All that concerns you concerns me as well; and I am only setting myself free from trouble and anxiety if I do anything for you. Don't you understand? And as far as my money is concerned, you know very well that if it had not been for John and those tiresome lawyers, you should have had it all and spent it, if you chose, without the slightest reference to me. What grieves me, dearest, is that you should have been suffering without taking me into your confidence."

"I ought to have done so," said Sydney, rather reluctantly, "but I felt as if I could not tell you all these paltry, sordid details. You might have thought——"

Then he paused, and the color rose darkly in his face.

"I should have thought nothing but what was honorable to you," said Nan, throwing back her graceful head with a gesture of natural pride and indignation.

"And now you think the worse of me?"

"No, no!" she cried, stealing one arm round his neck, "I think nothing bad of you—nothing! Only you *will* trust me, now, Sydney? You will not hide things from me again?"

"No, my darling, nothing that you ought to know," he said. There was a touch of new but restrained emotion in his voice. It struck him for almost the first time how much of his life he had hidden from her frank and innocent eyes.

Presently, when he had kissed her tears away, she begged him to tell her what he still actually owed, and, after some little demur, he consented. The amount of the debt, which lay heavily on his conscience, was comparatively a trivial thing to her. But when he had told her all, she looked at him with eyes which, although very loving, were full of wonder and dismay.

"Poor Sydney!" she said caressingly. "My poor boy! As if you could give your mind properly to anything with this heavy burden on it! To-morrow we can get the money, and pay off all these people. Then you will be able to work without any disturbance."

"Thanks to you, Nan," said her husband, with bowed head. She could not understand why he did not look more relieved. She never suspected that his mind was burdened with another debt, that money could not pay.

She had not asked him for any explanation of the items in the paper that she had read. The momentary wonder that had flitted across her mind passed as quickly as it came. The gifts that were not for her had been intended perhaps for his sister Lettice, perhaps for the wedding present of a friend. She did not like to ask. But a slightly uncomfortable sensation remained in her mind, and she never again wore the ring for which, as it now turned out, she herself had had to pay.

Sydney's position was certainly a painful one just then. But he was at any rate relieved of the burden of his debts, and he hoped, with some compunction of heart, that no other secret of his life would ever come to his wife's ears. It was about this time that he received the letter from Cora Walcott and had the interview with Lettice, of which mention has been made; and Nan fancied that it was anxiety about his sister that caused him to show signs of moodiness and depression. He had told her nothing more of Lettice's doings than he was obliged to tell, but other friends were not so reticent, and Lady Pynsent had enlightened Nan's mind very speedily with respect to the upshot of "the Walcott affair." Nan made some reference to it shortly afterwards in conversation with her husband, and was struck by the look of pain which crossed his face as he replied,

"Don't talk about it, Nan, my dear."

"He must be much fonder of his sister than I thought," Nan said to herself. She made one more effort to speak.

"Could I do nothing, Sydney? Suppose I went to her, and told her how grieved you were——"

"You, Nan! For heaven's sake, don't let me hear of your crossing the threshold of that house!" cried Sydney, with vehemence, which Nan very naturally misunderstood.

It was, on the whole, a relief to her to find that he did not want her to take any active steps in any direction. She was not very strong, and was glad to be left a good deal at peace. Sydney was out for a great part of the day, and Nan took life easily. Lady Pynsent came to sit with her sometimes, or drove in the Park with her, and other friends sought her out: she had tender hopes for the future which filled her mind with sweet content, and she would have been happy but for that slight jar between Sydney and herself. That consciousness of a want of trust which never ceased to give her pain. Sydney himself was the most attentive of husbands when he was at home: he brought her flowers and fruit, he read aloud to her, he hung over her as she lay on the sofa, and surrounded her with a hundred little marks of his affection—such as she would have thought delicious while her confidence in him was still unshaken. She still found pleasure in them; but her eyes were keener than they had been, and she knew that beneath all the manifestations of his real and strong attachment to her there ran a vein of apology and misgiving—a state of things inexpressibly unsatisfactory to a woman who knows how to love and how to trust.

Sydney, only half-conscious that something was wrong, had no idea how to mend matters, and was, therefore, in a fair way to make them worse. Frankness would have appeared brutal to him, and he did not see how subtly poisonous was the effect of his habits of concealment upon his wife's mind. Gifted with the instinct of discernment, which in sensitive women is almost like a sort of second-sight, she knew, without knowing how she knew, that he had trouble which he did not confide to her, secrets which his tongue would never tell. He could deceive her as to their existence so long as the period of illusion lasted; but as soon as her eyes were opened her sight became very keen indeed. And he, believing himself always successful in throwing dust in her eyes, fancied that her wistful look, her occasional unresponsiveness to his caresses, proceeded from physical causes only, and would with them also pass away.

Thus December left them, and the dark foggy days of January flew apace. It was close upon February before Nan recovered from a severe cold which had assailed her about Christmas time, and left her very weak. For a week or two she was confined entirely to her room, and when she came downstairs she was forced for a time to keep to the warm atmosphere of one sitting-room. But one day, when February was close at hand, and the fogs had begun to clear away, she felt so much stronger that she resolved to make a new departure and show Sydney that she was really better. Instead of going into the drawing-room, therefore, she came down another flight of stairs, and resolved to establish herself in Sydney's study, ready to greet him on his return.

But Sydney was late, and she was rather weaker than she knew. She had her tea, and ordered lights to be brought in, and the curtains drawn, but still he did not come. Then she found that the lights hurt her eyes, and she had them extinguished—all but one small silver lamp which stood on a centre-table, and gave a very subdued light. Her maid came and put a soft fur rug over her, and at her orders moved a screen of carved woodwork, brought from an Arab building in Algeria, between her and the fire before she left the room. Thus comfortably installed, the warmth and the dimness of the light speedily made Nan sleepy. She forgot to listen for the sound of her husband's latchkey; she fell fast asleep, and must have remained so for the greater part of an hour.

The fire went down, and its flickering flame no longer illuminated the room. The soft light of the lamp did not extend very far, and the screen, which was tall and dark, threw the sofa on which Nan lay into deep shadow. The rug completely covered the lower part of her dress, and as the sofa stood between the wall and the fire-place on that side of the room furthest removed from the door, any one entering might easily believe that the room was empty. Indeed, unless Nan stirred in her sleep, there was nothing at all to show that she was lying on the couch.

Thus, when Sydney entered his study about a quarter to seven, with a companion whom he had found waiting for him on the door-step, it would have been impossible for him to conjecture the presence of his wife. He did not light another lamp. The first words of his visitor had startled him into forgetting that the room was dark—perhaps, as the interview went on, he was glad of the obscurity into which his face was thrown. And the sounds of the low-toned conversation did not startle Nan from her slumber all at once. She had heard several sentences before she realized where she was and what she was listening to, and then very natural feelings kept her silent and motionless.

"No, I've not come for money," were the first words she heard. "Quite a different errand, Mr. Campion. It is some weeks since I left you now, and I left you because I had a competency bequeathed to me by an uncle."

"Pleased to hear it, I am sure, Johnson," was Sydney's response. "As you mentioned the name of another person, I thought that you had perhaps had a letter from her——"

"I have seen her, certainly, several times of late. And I am the bearer of a message from her. She has always regretted that she took a certain sum of money from you when she first found out how you had deceived her; and she wishes you to understand that she wants nothing more from you. The fact is, sir, I have long been very sorry for her misfortunes, and now that I am independent, I have asked her to marry me and go with me to America."

There was a little silence. "I am quite willing to provide for the child," said Sydney, "and——"

"No," said the man, almost sternly; "hear me out first, Mr. Campion. She owes her misery to you, and, no doubt, you have always thought that money could make atonement. But that's not my view, nor hers. We would rather not give you the satisfaction of making what *you* call restitution. Milly's child—your child, too—will be mine now; I shall adopt it for my own when I marry her. You will have nothing to do with either of them. And I have brought you back the twenty pounds which you gave her when you cruelly deserted her because you wanted to marry a rich woman. In that parcel you will find a locket and one or two other things that you gave her. I have told her, and Miss Campion, who has been the best of friends to us both, has told her that she must henceforth put the memory of you behind her, and live for those whom she loves best."

"Certainly; it is better that she should," said Sydney.

"That is all I have to say," Johnson remarked, "except that I shall do my best to help her to forget the past. But if ever *you* can forget your own cruelty and black treachery and villainy towards her——"

"That will do. I will not listen to insult from you or any man."

"You should rather be grateful to me for not exposing you to the world," said Johnson, drily, as he moved towards the door. "If it knew all that I know, what would your career be worth, Mr. Campion? As it is, no one knows the truth but ourselves and your sister, and all I want to remind you of is, that if we forget it, and if you forget it, I believe there is a God somewhere or other who never forgets."

"I am much obliged to you for the reminder," said Sydney, scornfully. But he could not get back the usual clearness of his voice.

Johnson went out without another word, and a minute later the front door was heard to close after him. Sydney stood perfectly still until that sound was heard. Then he moved slowly towards the table, where an envelope and a sealed packet were lying side by side. He looked at them for a minute or two, and flung himself into an arm-chair beside the table with an involuntary groan of pain. He was drawing the packet towards him, when a movement behind the screen caused him to spring desperately to his feet.

It was Nan, who had risen from the sofa and stood before him, her face white as the gown she wore, her eyes wide with a new despair, her fingers clutching at the collar of her dress as if the swelling throat craved the relief of freedom from all bands. Sydney's heart contracted with a sharp throb of pain, anger, fear—he scarcely knew which was uppermost. It flashed across his mind that he had lost everything in life which he cared for most—that Nan would despise him, that she would denounce him as a sorry traitor to his friends, that the story—a sufficiently black one, as he knew—would be published to the world. Disgrace and failure had always been the things that he had chiefly feared, and they lay straight before him now.

"I heard," Nan said, with white lips and choking utterance. "I was asleep when you came, but I think I heard it all. Is it true? There was some one—some one—that you left—for me?—some one who ought to have been your wife?"

"I swear I never loved anyone but you," he broke out, roughly and abruptly, able neither to repel nor to plead guilty to the charge she made, but miserably conscious that his one false step might cost him all that he held most dear. To Nan, the very vagueness and—as she deemed it—the irrelevance of his answer constituted an acknowledgment of guilt.

"Sydney," she murmured, catching at the table for support, and speaking so brokenly that he had difficulty in distinguishing the words, "Sydney—I cannot pay *this* debt!"

And then she fell at his feet in a swoon, which at first he mistook for death.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"SO SHALL YE ALSO REAP."

FOR some time Nan's life hung in the balance. It seemed as though a straw either way would suffice to turn the scales. Dead silence reigned in the house in Thurloe Square: the street outside was ankle-deep in straw: doctors and nurses took possession of Nan's pretty rooms, where all her graceful devices and gentle handicrafts were set aside, and their places filled with a grim array of medicaments. The servants, who loved their mistress, went about with melancholy faces and muffled voices; and the master of the house, hitherto so confident and self-reliant, presented to the world a stony front of silent desolation, for which nobody would have given Sydney Campion credit.

"Over-exertion or mental shock must have brought it on," said the doctor, when questioned by Lady Pynsent as to the cause of Mrs. Campion's illness.

"She can't have had a mental shock," said Lady Pynsent, decidedly. "She must have over-excited herself. Do you know how she did it, Sydney?"

"She fainted at my feet almost as soon as I saw her," said Sydney. "I don't know what she had been doing all the afternoon."

Nobody else seemed to know, either. The maid bore witness that her mistress had insisted on going downstairs, and it was generally supposed that this expedition had been too much for her strength. Only Sydney knew better, and he would not confide his knowledge to Lady Pynsent, although he spoke with more freedom to the doctor.

"Yes, she had bad news which distressed her. She fainted upon hearing it."

"That did the mischief. She was not in a condition to bear excitement," said the doctor, rather sharply; but he was sorry for his words, when he noted the distressed look on Sydney's face. He was the more sorry for him when it was discovered that he could not be admitted to the sick-room, for his appearance sent Nan's pulse up to fever-height at once, although she did not openly confess her agitation. The only thing that Sydney could do was to retire, baffled and disconsolate, to his study, where he passed the night in a state of indescribable anxiety and excitement.

When the fever abated, Nan fell into such prostration of strength that it was difficult to believe she would ever rise from her bed again. Weaker than a baby, she could move neither hand nor foot: she had to be fed like an infant, at intervals of a few minutes, lest the flame of life, which had sunk so low, should suddenly go out altogether. It was at this point of her illness that she fainted when Sydney once persuaded the doctor to let him enter her room, and the nurses had great difficulty in bringing her back to consciousness. After which, there was no more talk of visits from her husband, and Sydney had to resign himself to obtaining news of her from the doctor and the nurses, who, he fancied, looked at him askance, as blaming him in their hearts for his wife's illness.

"I can't make Nan out," said Lady Pynsent to him one day. "She is so depressed—she cries if one looks at her almost—and yet the very thing that I expected her to be unhappy about does not affect her in the least."

"What do you mean?" said Sydney.

"Why, her disappointment about her baby, of course. I said something about it, and she just whispered, 'I'm very glad.' I suppose it is simply that she feels so weak, otherwise I should have thought it unnatural in Nan, who was always so fond of children."

Sydney made no answer. He was beginning to find this state of things intolerable. After all, he asked himself, what had he done that his wife should be almost killed by the shock of finding out that he had behaved—as other men behaved? But that sort of reasoning would not do. His behavior to Milly had been, as he knew, singularly heartless; and he had happened to marry a girl whose greatest charm to him had been her tenderness of heart, her innocent candor, and that purity of mind which comes of hatred—not ignorance—of sin. A worldlier woman would not have been so shocked; but he had never desired less crystalline transparency of mind—less exquisite whiteness of soul, for Nan. No; that was the worst of it: the very qualities that he admired and respected in her bore witness against him now.

He remembered the last hours of his father's life—how they had been embittered by his selfish anger, for which he had never been able to make amends. Was his wife also to die without giving him a word of forgiveness, or hearing him ask her pardon? If she died, he knew that he would have slain her as surely as if he had struck her to the ground with his strong right hand. For almost the first time in his life Sydney found himself utterly unnerved by his anxiety. His love for Nan was the truest and strongest emotion that he had ever felt. And that his love for her should be sullied in her eyes by comparison with the transient influence which Milly had exercised over him was an intolerable outrage on his best and holiest affections and on hers. "What must she think of me?" he said to himself; and he was fain to confess that she could not think much worse of him than he deserved. It was a bitter harvest that he was reaping from seed that he himself had sown.

He was almost incapable of work during those terrible days when he did not know whether Nan would live or die. He got through as much as was absolutely imperative; but he dreaded being away from the house, lest that "change," of which the nurses spoke, should come during his absence; and he managed to stay at home for many hours of the day.

But at last the corner was turned: a little return of strength was reported, and by and by the doctor assured him that, although his patient still required very great care, the immediate danger was past, and there was at least a fair hope of her ultimate recovery. But he might not see her—yet.

So much was gained; but Sydney's spirits did not rise at once. He was conscious of some relief from the agony of suspense, but black care and anxiety sat behind him still. He was freer to come and go, however, than he had been for some time, and the first use he made of his liberty was to go to the very person whom he had once vowed never to see again—his sister Lettice.

She had written to him since his interview with her at Bute Lodge. She had told him of Alan's departure, and—

to some extent—of its cause: she had given him the address of the lodgings to which she was now going (for a continued residence at Bute Lodge was beyond her means), and she sent him her sisterly love—and that was all. She had not condescended to any justification of her own conduct, nor had she alluded to the accusations that he had made, nor to his own discomfiture. But there had been enough quiet warmth in the letter to make him conscious that he might count on her forgiveness and affection if he desired it. And he did desire it. In the long hours of those sleepless nights and weary days in which he had waited for better news of Nan, it was astonishing to find how clearly the years of his boyhood had come back to him—those quiet, peaceful years in which he had known nothing of the darker sides of life, when the serene atmosphere of the rectory and the village had been dear to his heart, and Lettice had been his cherished companion and trusty comrade in work or play. It was like going back into another world—a purer and a truer world than the one in which he lived now.

And in these hours of retrospect, he came to clearer and truer conclusions respecting Lettice's character and course of action than he had been able to do before he was himself smitten by the hand of Fate. Lettice was interpreted to him by Nan. There *were* women in the world, it seemed, who had consciences, and pure hearts, and generous emotions: it was not for him to deny it now. And he had been very hard on Lettice in days gone by. He turned to her now with a stirring of affection which he had not known for years.

But when he entered Lettice's room, and she came to meet him, gravely, and with a certain inquiry in her look, he suddenly felt that he had no reason to give for his appearance there.

"Sydney!" she had exclaimed in surprise. Then, after the first long glance, and with a quick change of tone: "Sydney, are you ill?"

For he was haggard and worn, as she had never seen him, with dark lines under his eyes, and an air of prostration and fatigue.

"No, I'm very well. It's Nan—my wife," he said, avoiding her alarmed gaze.

"I am sorry—very sorry. Is she——"

"She has been on the brink of death. There is some hope now. I don't know why I came here unless it was to tell you so," said Sydney, with an odd abruptness which seemed to be assumed in order to mask some unusually strong feeling. "I suppose you know that the man Johnson came to see me——"

"Yes: they have gone," said Lettice, quickly. "They were married yesterday, and sailed this morning."

"Ah! Well, *she* was in the room when he—made his communication to me. I did not know it—Johnson never knew it at all. She had been asleep—but she woke and heard what he said. She fainted—and she has been ill ever since." He added a few words concerning the technicalities of his wife's case.

"Oh, Sydney!—my poor Sydney! I am so sorry," said Lettice, her eyes full of tears. For she saw, by his changed manner, something of what his trouble had been, and she instantly forgot all causes of complaint against him. He was sitting sideways on a chair, with his head on his hand; and when she put her arms round his neck and kissed him, he did not repulse her—indeed, he kissed her in return, and seemed comforted by her caress.

"I can't even see her," he went on. "She faints if I go into the room. How long do you think it will last, Lettice? Will she ever get over it, do you think?"

"If she loves you, I think she will, Sydney. But you must give her time. No doubt it was a great shock to her," said Lettice.

He looked at her assentingly, and then stared out of the window as if absorbed in thought. The result of his reflections seemed to be summed up in a short sentence which, certainly, Lettice had never expected to hear from Sydney's lips:—

"I can't think how I came to be such a damned fool. I beg your pardon, Lettice; but it's true."

"Can I be of any use to you—or to her?"

"Thank you, I don't think so—just yet. I don't know—" heavily—"whether she will want you some day to tell her all you know."

"Oh, no, Sydney!"

"You must do just what you think best about it. I shall put no barriers in the way. Perhaps she had better know everything now."

Then he roused himself a little and looked at her kindly.

"How are you getting on?" he said. "Writing as usual?"

"Yes, I am busy, and doing very well."

"You look thin and fagged."

"Oh, Sydney, if you could but see yourself!"

He smiled at this, and then rose to go.

"But you will stay and have tea with me? Do, Sydney—if only," and Lettice's voice grew low and deep, "if only in token that there is peace between us."

So he stayed; and, although they spoke no more of the matters that were dearest to their hearts, Lettice's bitterness of feeling towards her brother disappeared, and Sydney felt vaguely comforted in his trouble by her sympathy.

She did not tell him of the strange marriage-scene which she had witnessed the day before—when Milly, almost hysterical from over-wrought feeling, had vowed to be a true and faithful wife to the man who had pitied and succored her in the time of her sorest need: of Johnson's stolid demeanor, covering a totally unexpected fund of good-feeling and romance; or of his extraordinary desire, which Lettice had seen carried out, that the baby should be present at its mother's wedding, and should receive—poor little mite—a fatherly kiss from him as soon as he had kissed the forlorn and trembling bride. For Milly, although she professed to like and respect Michael Johnson, shrank somewhat from the prospect of life in another country, and was nervous and excitable to a degree which rather alarmed her mistress. Lettice confessed on reflection, however, that Johnson knew exactly how to manage poor little Milly; and that he had called smiles to her face in the very midst of a last flood of tears; and that she had no fear for the girl's ultimate happiness. Johnson had behaved in a very straightforward, manly and considerate way; and in new surroundings, in a new country, with a kind husband and good prospects, Milly was likely to lead a very happy and comfortable life. Lettice was glad to think so; and was more sorry to see the baby go than to part from Milly. Indeed, she had offered to adopt it; but Johnson was so indignant, and Milly so tearful, at the idea, that she had been forced to relinquish her desire. All this, however, she withheld from Sydney; as also her expedition to the station to see the little party start for Liverpool, and Milly's grief at parting with the forbearing mistress whom she had once deceived, and who had been, after all, her truest friend.

Nan began, very slowly, but surely, to amend; and Sydney, going back to his usual pursuits, seemed busier than ever.

But, in spite of himself, he was haunted night and day by the fear of what would happen next; of what Nan meant to do when she grew strong. Would she ever forgive him? And if she did not forgive him, what would she do? Tell the whole story to Sir John, and insist on returning to her brother's house? That would be an extreme thing, and Sir John—who was a man of the world—would probably pooh pooh her virtuous indignation; but Nan had a way of carrying out her resolves whether Sir John pooh-poohed them or not. And supposing that Nan separated herself from him, Sydney could not but see that a very serious imputation would be thrown on his character, even if the true story were not known in all its details. That mock marriage—which he had not at first supposed that Milly had taken seriously—had a very ugly sound. And he had made too many enemies for the thing to be allowed to drop if once it came to the light.

His career was simply at the mercy of two women—the Johnsons were not, he thought, likely to break silence—and if either of them should prove to be indiscreet or vindictive, he was a ruined man. He had injured and insulted his sister: he had shocked and horrified his wife. What Nan thought of him he could not tell. He had always believed that women were too small-minded to forget an injury, to forgive an insult, or to keep silence regarding their husbands' transgressions. If Nan once enlisted Sir John's sympathies on her side, he knew that, although he might ultimately recover from the blow inflicted by his brother-in-law's offense and anger, his chance of success in life would be diminished. And for what a cause? He writhed as he thought of the passing, contemptuous fancy, for the indulgence of which he might have to sacrifice so much and had already sacrificed part of what was dearest in life to him. Yes, he told himself, he was at Nan's mercy, and he had not hitherto found women very ready to hold their hands when weapons had been put into them, and all the instincts of outraged vanity made them strike.

Sydney Campion prided himself on a wide experience of men and women, and a large acquaintance with human nature. But he did not yet know Nan.

The story which had been so suddenly unfolded to her had struck her to the earth with the force of a blow, for more than one reason, but chiefly because she had trusted Sydney so completely. She was not so ignorant of the ways of men as to believe that their lives were always free from stain; indeed she knew more than most girls of the weakness and wickedness of mankind, partly because she was well acquainted with many Vanebury working-people, who were her tenants, partly because Lady Pynsent was a woman of the world and did not choose that Nan should go about with her eyes closed, and partly because she read widely and had never been restricted in the choice of books. She was not a mere ignorant child, shrinking from knowledge as if it were contamination, and blindly believing in the goodness and innocence of all men. But this theoretical acquaintance with the world had not saved her from the error into which women are apt to fall—the error of setting up her lover on a pedestal and believing that he was not as other men. She was punished for her mistake, she told herself bitterly, by finding that he was even worse, not better, than other men, whose weakenesses she had contemned.

For there had been a strain of meanness and cruelty in Sydney's behavior to the girl whom he had ruined which cut his wife to the heart. She had been taught, and she had tried—with some misgiving—to believe that she ought to be prepared to condone a certain amount of levity, of "wildness," even, in her husband's past; but here she saw deliberate treachery, cold-blooded selfishness, which startled her from her dream of happiness. Nan was a little too logical for her own peace of mind. She could not look at an action as an isolated fact in a man's life: it was an outcome of character. What Sydney had done showed Sydney as he was. And, oh, what a fall was there! how different from the ideal that she had hoped to see realized in him!

It never once occurred to Nan to take either Sir John or Lady Pynsent into her confidence. Sydney was quite mistaken in thinking that she would fly to them for consolation. She would have shrunk sensitively from telling them any story to his discredit. Besides, she shrewdly suspected that they would not share her disappointment, her sense of disillusion; Sir John had more than once laughed in an oddly amused way when she dropped a word in praise of Sydney's high-mindedness and generous zeal for others. "Campion knows which side his bread's buttered," he had once made her angry by saying. She had not the slightest inclination to talk to them of Sydney's past life and character.

Besides, she knew well enough that she had no actual cause of complaint in the eyes of the world. Her husband was not bound to tell her all that happpened to him before he met her; and he had severed all connection with that unhappy young woman before he asked her, Anna Pynsent, to be his wife. Nan's grievance was one of those intangible grievances which bring the lines into so many women's faces and the pathos into their eyes—the grievance of having set up an idol and seen it fall. The Sydney Campion who had deceived and wronged a trusting girl was not the man that she had known and loved. That was all. It was nothing that could be told to the outer world, nothing that in itself constituted a reason for her leaving him and making him a mark for arrows of scandal and curiosity; but it simply killed outright the love that she had hitherto borne him, so that her heart lay cold and heavy in her bosom as a stone.

So frozen and hard it seemed to her, that she could not bring herself to acknowledge that certain words spoken to her husband by the stranger had had any effect on her at all. In the old days, as she said to herself, they would have hurt her terribly. "*You cruelly deserted her because you wanted to marry a rich woman.*" She, Nan, was the rich woman for whom Sydney Campion had deserted another. It was cruel to have made *her* the cause of Sydney's treachery—the instrument of his fall. She had never wished to wrong anyone, nor that anyone should be wronged for her sake. She would not, she thought, have married Sydney if she had known this story earlier. Why had he married her?—ah, there came in the sting of the sentence which she had overheard: "You wanted to marry a rich woman." Yes, she was rich. Sydney had not even paid her the very poor compliment of deserting another woman because he loved her best—he had loved her wealth and committed a base deed to gain it, that was all.

She was unjust to Sydney in this; but it was almost impossible that she should not be unjust. The remembrance of his burden of debt came back to her, of the bill that he could not meet, of the list of his liabilities which he had been so loath to give her, and she told herself that he had desired nothing but her wealth and the position that she could give him. To attain his own ends he had made a stepping-stone of her. He was welcome to do so. She would make it easy for him to use her money, so that he need never know the humiliation of applying to her for it. Now that she understood what he wanted, she would never again make the mistake of supposing that he cared for her. But it was hard on her—hard to think that she had given the love of her youth to a man who valued her only for her gold; hard to know that the dream of happiness was over, and that the brightness of her life was gone.

It was no wonder that Nan's recovery was slow, when she lay, day after day, night after night, the slow tears creeping down her cheeks, thinking such thoughts as these. The blow seemed to have broken her heart and her will to live. It would have been a relief to her to be told that she must die.

Her weakness was probably responsible for part of the depth and darkness of her despair. She was a puzzle to her sister-in-law, who had been used to find in Nan a never-failing spring of brightness and gentle mirth. Lady Pynsent began to see signs of something more than a physical ailment. She said one day, more seriously than usual,

"I hope, Nan, you have not quarreled with your husband."

"Oh no, no," said Nan, starting and flushing guilty; "I never quarrel with Sydney."

"I fancied there was something amiss. Take my advice, Nan, and don't stand on your dignity with your husband. A man is ready enough to console himself with somebody else if his wife isn't nice to him. I would make it up if I were you, if there has been anything wrong."

Nan kept silence.

"He is very anxious about you. Don't you think you are well enough to see him to-day?" For Sydney had not entered Nan's room since that unlucky time when she fainted at his appearance.

"Oh no, no—not to-day," said Nan. And then, collecting herself, she added, "At least—not just yet—a little later in the afternoon, I mean."

"I'll tell him to look in at four," said Lady Pynsent.

So at four Sydney was admitted, and it would have been hard to say whether husband or wife felt the more embarrassment. Sydney tried hard to behave as though nothing were amiss between them. He kissed her and asked after her well-being; but he did so with an inward tremor and a great uncertainty as to the reception that he should meet with. But she allowed him to kiss her; she even kissed him in return and smiled a very little, more than once, while he was talking to her; and he, feeling his heart grow lighter while she smiled, fancied that the shadow of sadness in her eyes, the lifelessness of her voice and hand, came simply from bodily weakness and from no deeper cause.

After this first visit, he saw her each day for longer intervals, and realized very quickly that she had no intention of shunning him or punishing him before the world, as he had feared that she would do. She was so quiet, so gentle to him, that, with all a man's obtuseness where women are concerned, he congratulated himself on being let off so easily, and thought that the matter was to be buried in oblivion. He even wondered a little at Nan's *savoir-faire*, and felt a vague sense of disappointment mingling with his relief. Was he to hear no more about it, although she had been struck down and brought almost to death's door by the discovery of his wretched story?

It seemed to be so, indeed. For some time he was kept in continual suspense, expecting her to speak to him on the subject; but he waited in vain. Then, with great reluctance, he himself made some slight approach, some slight reference to it; a reference so slight that if, as he sometimes fancied, her illness *had* destroyed her memory of the conversation which she had overheard in the study, he need not betray himself. But there was no trace of lack of memory in Nan's face, when he brought out the words which he hoped would lead to some fuller understanding between them. She turned scarlet and then white as snow. Turning her face aside, she said, in a low but very distinct voice, "I want to hear no more about it, Sydney."

"But, Nan——"

"*Please* say no more," she interrupted. And something in her tone made him keep silence. He looked at her for a minute or two, but she would not look at him, and so he got up and left her, with a sense of mingled injury and defeat.

No, she had not forgotten: she was not oblivious; and he doubted whether she had forgiven him as he thought. The prohibition to speak on the subject chafed him, although he had previously said to himself that it was next to impossible for him to mention it to her. And he was puzzled, for he had not followed the workings of Nan's mind in the least, and the words concerning his marriage with her and his reasons for it had slipped past him unheeded, while his thoughts were fixed upon other things.

CHAPTER XL.

WHO WITH REPENTANCE IS NOT SATISFIED—."

Before the summer came, Mrs. Sydney Campion was well enough to drive out in an open carriage, and entertain visitors; but it was painfully apparent to her friends that her health had received a shock from which it had not by any means recovered. She grew better up to a certain point, and there she seemed to stay. She had lost all interest in life. Day after day, when Sydney came home, he would find her sitting or lying on a sofa, white and still, with book or work dropped idly in her lap, her dark eyes full of an unspoken sorrow, her mouth drooping in mournful curves, her thin cheek laid against a slender hand, where the veins looked strangely blue through the delicate whiteness of the flesh. But she never complained. When her husband brought her flowers and presents, as he still liked to do, she took them gently and thanked him; but he noticed that she laid them aside and seldom looked at them again. The spirit seemed to have gone out of her. And in his own heart Sydney raged and fretted—for why, he said to himself, should she not be like other women?—why, if she had a grudge against him, should she not tell him so? She might reproach him as bitterly as she pleased; the storm would spend itself in time and break in sunshine; but this terrible silence was like a nightmare about them both! He wished that he had the courage to break through it, but he was experiencing the truth of the saying that conscience makes cowards of us all, and he dared not break the silence that she had imposed.

One day, when he had brought her some flowers, she put them away from her with a slight unusual sign of impatience.

"Don't bring me any more," she said.

Her husband looked at her intently. "You don't care for them?"

"No."

"I thought," he said, a little mortification struggling with natural disappointment in his breast, "that I had heard you say you liked them—or, at any rate, that you liked me to bring them——"

"That was long ago," she answered softly, but coldly. She lay with her eyes closed, her face very pale and weary.

"One would think," he went on, spurred by puzzled anger to put a long unspoken thought into bare words, "that you did not care for me now—that you did not love me any longer?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him steadily. There was something almost like pity in her face.

"I am afraid it is true, Sydney. I am very sorry."

He stood staring at her a little longer, as if he could not believe his ears. The red blood slowly mounted to his forehead. She returned his gaze with the same look of almost wistful pity, in which there was an aloofness, a coldness, that showed him as nothing else had ever done the extent of her estrangement from himself. Somehow he felt as though she had struck him on the lips. He walked away from her without another word, and shut himself into his study, where he sat for some minutes at his writing-table, seeing nothing, thinking of nothing, dumbly conscious that he was, on the whole, more wretched than he had ever been in the course of a fairly prosperous and successful life.

He loved Nan, and Nan did not love him. Well, there was an end of his domestic happiness. Fortunately, there was work to be done still, success to be achieved, prizes to win in the world of men. He was not going to sit down and despair because he had lost a woman's love. And so, with set lips and frowning brow he once more set to work, and this time with redoubled vigor; but he knew all the while that he was a very miserable man.

Perhaps if he had seen Nan crying over the flowers that she had just rejected, he might have hoped that there was still a chance of recovering the place in her heart which he had lost.

But after this short conversation life went on in the old ways. Sydney appeared to be more than ever engrossed in his work. Nan grew paler and stiller every day. Lady Pynsent became anxious and distressed.

"Sydney, what are you doing? what are you thinking about?" she said to him one day, when she managed to catch him for five minutes alone. "Don't you see how ill Nan is?"

"She looks ill; but she always says there is nothing the matter with her."

"That is a very bad sign. I hope you have made her consult a good doctor? There is Burrows—I should take her to him."

"Burrows! Why, he is a specialist!"

"Nan's mother died of decline. Burrows attended her."

Sydney went away with a new fear implanted in his heart.

Dr. Burrows was sent for, and saw his patient; but he did not seem able to form any definite opinion concerning her. He said a few words to Sydney, however, which gave him food for a good deal of reflection during the next day or two.

At the end of that time, he came to Nan's sitting-room with a look of quiet purpose on his face. "May I speak to you for a minute?" he began formally—he had got into the way of speaking very formally and ceremoniously to her now. "Can you listen to me?"

"Certainly. Won't you sit down?"

But he preferred to remain standing at an angle where she could not see his face without turning her head.

"I have been talking to Dr. Burrows about you. He tells me, I am sorry to say, that you are still very weak; but he thinks that there is nothing wrong but weakness, though that is bad enough in itself. But he wishes me also to say—you will remember that it is he who speaks, not I—that if you could manage to rouse yourself, Nan, if *you* would made an effort to get stronger, he thinks you might do it, if you chose."

"Like Mrs. Dombey," said Nan, with a faint, cheerless smile.

"He is afraid," Sydney went on, with the air of one who repeats a lesson, "that you are drifting into a state of hopeless invalidism, which you might still avoid. Once in that state you would not die, Nan, as you might like to do: you would live for years in helpless, useless, suffering. Nan, my dear, it is very hard for me to say this to you"—his voice quivering—"but I promised Burrows, for your own sake, that I would. Such a life, Nan, would be torture to you; and you have it still within your power—you can prevent it if you chose."

"It seems to me very cruel to say so," Nan answered, quietly. "What can I do that I have not done? I have taken all the doctors' remedies and done exactly as they bade me. I am very tired of being ill and weak, I assure you. It is not my fault that I should like to die."

She began to cry a little as she spoke. Her mouth and chin quivered: the tears ran slowly over her white cheeks. Sydney drew a step nearer.

"No, it isn't your fault," he said, hoarsely, "it is mine. I believe I am killing you by inches. Do you want to make me feel myself a murderer? Could you not—even for my poor sake—*try* to get stronger, Nan, *try* to take an interest in something—something healthy and reasonable? That is what Dr. Burrows says you need; and I can't do this thing for you; I, whom you don't love any longer," he said, with a sudden fury of passion which stopped her tears at once, "but who love *you* with all my heart, as I never loved in all my life before—I swear it before God!"

He stopped short: he had not meant to speak of his love for her, only to urge her to make that effort over her languor and her indifference which the great physician said she must make before her health could be restored. Nan lay looking at him, the tears drying on her pale cheeks, her lips parted, her eyes unusually bright; but she did not speak.

"If there was anything I could do to please you," her husband went on in a quieter tone, "I would do it. Would you care, for instance, to live abroad? Burrows recommends a bracing air. If you would go with me to Norway or Switzerland—at once; and then pass the winter at Davos, or any place you liked; perhaps you would care for that? Is there nothing you would like to do? You used to say you wanted to see India——"

"But your work!" she broke in suddenly. "*You* could not go: it is useless to talk of an impossibility."

"If it would make you better or happier, I would go."

"But the House?——"

"Nothing easier than to accept the Chiltern Hundreds," said Sydney.

"And your profession?" said Nan, raising herself on one arm and looking keenly at him.

She saw that he winced at the question, but he scarcely paused before he replied.

"I have thought it well over. I could go on practising when I came back to England; and in the meantime—— I suppose you would have to take me abroad, Nan: I could not well take you," he said with a grim sort of jocularity, which she could not help seeing was painful to him. "If it did you good, as Burrows thinks it would, I should be quite prepared to give up everything else."

"Give up everything else," Nan murmured. "For me?"

He drew a long breath. "Well, yes. The fact is I have lost some of my old interest in my work, compared with other things. I have come to this, Nan—I would let my career go to the winds, if by doing so I could give you back strength and happiness. Tell me what I can do: that is all. I have caused you a great deal of misery, I know: if there is any way in which I can——atone——"

He did not go on, and for a few moments Nan could not speak. There was color enough in her cheeks now, and light in her eyes, but she turned away from him, and would not let him see her face.

"I want to think over what you have said. Please don't think me ungracious or unkind, Sydney. I want to do what is best. We can talk about it another time, can we not?"

"Any time you like."

And then he left her, and she lay still.

Had she been wrong all the while? Had she of her own free will allowed herself to drift into this state of languor, and weakness, and indifference to everything? What did these doctors know—what did Sydney himself know—of the great wave of disgust and shame and scorn that had passed over her soul and submerged all that was good and fair? They could not understand: she said to herself passionately that no man could understand the recoil of a woman's heart against sensual passion and impurity. In her eyes Sydney had fallen as much as the woman whom he had betrayed, although she knew that the world would not say so; and in his degradation she felt herself included. She was dragged down to his level—*she* was dragged through the mire: that was the thought that scorched her from time to time like a darting flame of fire. For Nan was very proud, although she looked so gentle, and she had never before come into contact with anything that could stain her whiteness of soul.

She had told Sydney that she loved him no longer, and in the deadness of emotion which had followed on the first acuteness of her grief for her lost idol, and the physical exhaustion caused by her late illness, she had thought she spoke the truth. But, after all, what was this yearning over him, in spite of all his errors, but love? what this continual thought of him, this aching sense of loss, even this intense desire that he should suffer for his sin, but an awakening within her of the deep, blind love that, as a woman has said, sometimes

"Stirreth deep below"

the ordinary love of common life, with a

"Hidden beating slow,
And the blind yearning, and the long-drawn breath
Of the love that conquers death"?

For the first time she was conscious of the existence of love that was beyond the region of spoken words, or caresses, or the presence of the beloved: love that intertwined itself with the fibres of her whole being, so that if it were smitten her very life was smitten too. This was the explanation of her weariness, her weakness, her distaste for everything: the best part of herself was gone when her love seemed to be destroyed. The invisible cords of love which bind a mother to her child are explicable on natural grounds; but not less strong, not less natural, though less common, are those which hold a nature like Nan's to the soul of the man she loves. That Sydney was unworthy of such a love, need not be said; but it is the office of the higher nature to seek out the unworthy and "to make the low nature better by its throes."

Nan lay still and looked her love in the face, and was startled to find that it was by no means dead, but stronger than it had been before. "And he is my husband," she said to herself; "I am bound to be true to him. I am ashamed to have faltered. What does it matter if he has erred? I may be bitterly sorry, but I will not love him one whit the less. I could never leave him now."

But a thought followed which was a pain to her. If she loved him in spite of error, what of her own sense of right and wrong? Was she not in danger of paltering with it in order to excuse him? would she not in time be tempted to say that he had not erred, that he had done only as other men do?—and so cloud the fair outlines of truth which had hitherto been mapped out with ethereal clearness for her by that conscience which she had always regarded, vaguely but earnestly, as in some sort the voice of God? Would she ever say that she herself had been an ignorant little fool in her judgment of men and men's temptations, and laugh at herself for her narrowness and the limitation of her view? Would she come to renounce her high ideal, and content herself with what was merely expedient and comfortable and "like other people"? In that day, it seemed to Nan that she will be selling her own soul.

No, the way out of the present difficulty was not easy. She could tell Sydney that she loved him, but not that she thought him anything but wrong—wrong from beginning to end in the conduct of his past life. And would he be content with a love that condemned him? How easy it would be for her to love and forgive him if only he would give her one little sign by which to know that he himself was conscious of the blackness of that past! Repentance would show at least that there was no twist in his conscience, no flaw in his ethical constitution; it would set him right with the universe, if not with himself. For the moment there was nothing Nan so passionately desired as to hear him own himself in the wrong—not for any personal satisfaction so much as for his own sake; also that she might then put him upon a higher pedestal than ever, and worship him as a woman is always able to worship the man who has sinned and repented, rather than the man who has never fallen from his high estate; to rejoice over him as angels rejoice over the penitent more than over the just that need no repentance.

Sydney was a good deal startled when his wife said to him a few days later, in rather a timid way:

"Your sister has never been here. May I ask her to come and see me?"

"Certainly, if you wish it." He had not come to approve of Lettice's course of action, but he did not wish his disapproval to be patent to the world.

"I do wish it very much."

Sydney glanced at her quickly, but she did not look back at him. She only said:

"I have her address. I will ask her to come to-morrow afternoon."

"Very well."

So Nan wrote her note, and Lettice came.

As it happened, the two had never met. Lettice's preoccupation with her own affairs, Sydney's first resentment, now wearing off, and Nan's subsequent illness, had combined to prevent their forming any acquaintance. But the two women had no sooner clasped hands, and looked into each other's eyes, than they loved one another, and the sense of mental kinship made itself plain between them.

They sat down together on the couch in Nan's private sitting-room and fell into a little aimless talk, which was succeeded by a short, significant silence. Then Nan put out her hand and look Lettice's in her own.

"*You know!*" she said, in a whisper.

"I know—what?"

"You know all that is wrong between Sydney and myself. You know what made me ill."

"Yes."

"And you know too—that I love him—very dearly." The words were broken by a sob.

"Yes, dear—as he loves you."

"You think so—really?"

"I am quite sure of it. How could you doubt that?"

"I did doubt it for a time. I heard the man say that he married me because I was—rich."

"And you believed it?"

"I believed anything—everything. And the rest," said Nan, with a rising color in her face, "the rest was true."

"Dear," said Lettice, gently, "there is only one thing to be said now—that he would be very glad to undo the past. He is very sorry."

"You think he is?"

"Can you look at him and not see the marks of his sorrow and his pain upon his face? He has suffered a great deal; and it would be better for him now to forget the past, and to feel that you forgave him."

Nan brushed away some falling tears, but did not speak at once.

"Lettice," she said at last, in a broken whisper, "I believe I have been very hard and cold all these long months. I thought I did not care—but I do, I do. Only—I wish I could forget—that poor girl—and the little child——"

She burst into sudden weeping, so vehement that Lettice put both her arms round the slight, shaken figure, and tried to calm her by caresses and gentle words.

"Is there nothing that I could do? nothing Sydney could do—to make amends?"

"Nothing," said Lettice gently, but with decision. "They are happy now, and prosperous; good has come out of the evil, and it is better to forget the evil itself. Don't be afraid; I hear from them, and about them, constantly, and if ever they were in need of help, our hands would be the ones stretched out to help them. The good we cannot do to them we can do to others for their sakes."

And Nan was comforted.

Sydney came home early that evening; anxious, disquieted, somewhat out of heart. He found that Lettice had gone, and that Nan was in her sitting-room. He generally went up to her when he came in, and this time he did not fail; though his lips paled a little as he went upstairs, for the thought forced itself upon him that Lettice might have made things worse, not better, between himself and his wife.

The daylight was fading as he entered the room. Nan was lying down, but she was not asleep, for she turned her head towards him as he entered. He noticed the movement. Of late she had always averted her face when he came near her. He wished that he could see her more plainly, but she was wrapped in shadow, and the room was almost dark.

He asked after her health as usual, and whether Lettice had been and gone. Then silence fell between them, but he felt that Nan was looking at him intently, and he did not dare to turn away.

"Sydney," she said at last. "Will you come here? Close to me. I want to say something——"

"Yes, Nan?"

He bent down over her, with something like a new hope in his heart. What was she going to say to him?

"Sydney—will you take me to Switzerland?"

"Certainly." Was that all? "When shall we go?"

"When can you leave London?"

"To-morrow. Any time."

"You really would give up all your engagements, all your prospects, for me?"

"Willingly, Nan."

"I begin to believe," she said, softly, "that you do care for me—a little."

"Nan! Oh, Nan, have you doubted it?"

Her hand stole gently into his; she drew him down beside her.

"Dear Sydney, come here. Put your arm right round me—so. Now I can speak. I want to tell you something—many things. It is Lettice that has made me think I ought to say all this. Do you know, I have felt for a long, long time as if you had killed me—killed the best part of me, I mean—the soul that loved you, the belief in all that was good and true. That is why I have been so miserable. I did not know how to bear it. I thought that I did not love you; but I have loved you all the time; and now—now——"

"Now?" said Sydney. She felt that the arm on which she leaned was trembling like a leaf.

"Now I could love you better than ever—if I knew one thing—if I dared ask——"

"You may ask what you like," he said, in a husky voice.

"It is not such a very great thing," she said, simply; "it is only what you yourself think about the past: whether you think with me that it is something to be sorry about, or something to be justified. I feel as if I could forget it if I knew that you were sorry; and if you justified it--as some men would do—oh, I should never reproach you, Sydney, but I would much rather die!"

There was a silence. His head was on the cushion beside her, but his face was hidden, and she could gather only from his loud, quick breathing that he was deeply moved. But it was some time before he spoke.

"I don't try to justify myself," he said, at last. "I was wrong—I know it well enough—and—well if you must have me say it—God knows that I am—sorry."

"Ah," she said, "that is all I wanted you to say. Oh Sydney, my darling, can anything now but death come between you and me?"

And she drew his head down upon her bosom and let it rest there, dearer in the silent shame that bowed it before her than in the heyday of its pride.

So they were reconciled, and the past sin and sorrow were slowly blotted out in waters of repentance. Before the world, Sydney Campion is still the gay, confident, successful man that he has always been—a man who does not make many friends, and who has, or appears to have, an overweening belief in his own powers. But there is a softer strain in him as well. Within his heart there is a chamber held sacred from the busy world in which he moves: and here a woman is enshrined, with all due observance, with lights burning and flowers blooming, as his patron saint. It is Nan who presides here, who knows the inmost recesses of his thought, who has gauged the extent of his failures and weakness as well as his success, who is conscious of the strength of his regrets as well as the burdensome weight of a dead sin. And in her, therefore, he puts the trust which we can only put in those who know all sides of us, the worst side even as the best: on her he has even come to lean with that sense of uttermost dependence, that feeling of repose, which is given to us only in the presence of a love that is more than half divine.

CHAPTER XLI.

A FREE PARDON.

ST. JAMES' HALL was packed from end to end one summer afternoon by an eager mob of music lovers—or, at least, of those who counted themselves as such. The last Philharmonic Concert of the season had been announced; and as one of its items was Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the crowd was, as usual on such an occasion, a great and enthusiastic one.

Even the dark little gallery near the roof, fronting the orchestra, was well filled, for there are music lovers (mostly those whose purse is lean) who declare that, though the shilling gallery is hot, and close, and dark, there is in all the room no better place for hearing the great waves of sound rolled out by the orchestra from the Master's mighty scores. And it was for this reason that Lettice Campion came up the narrow stairs that afternoon at ten minutes to three, and found, as she might have expected, that only a few seats against the wall remained empty. Into the nearest of these she dropped, rather exhausted by her climb and the haste that she had made; and then she noticed, as her eyes became accustomed to the dim light, that some one beside her had half turned round, and was looking earnestly into her face.

"Alan!"

The color sprang into Lettice's face: the roll of music that she carried dropped from her lap as she held out her hand. Alan returned her greeting, and then dived for her music, thus giving her a moment in which to recover her self-possession. When he came up again, she was still a little flushed, but she was smiling tranquilly.

"I am so glad to see you," she said simply.

"I don't know what impelled me to come this afternoon. I never thought that I should have this happiness." Then, in a lower tone, "You don't mind my being here? You don't want me to go away?"

"No, no, why should I? It does not matter—here."

They had not seen each other at all for weeks, and had met only two or three times, and then for a few minutes only, since Alan left Bute Lodge in December. They corresponded freely and frankly, but Lettice had decreed, in spite of some murmurs from Alan, that they should not meet. Scandal had been busy with her name, and, until Alan obtained his divorce, it seemed better to her to live a very retired life, seeing almost nobody, and especially guarding herself against accusations of any close association with Alan Walcott.

"I had just posted a letter to you before I came out," he said. They were at the end of the last row of seats and could talk, before the music began, without any fear of being overheard. "It is as I expected, Lettice. There are great difficulties in our way."

She looked an interrogation.

"The length of time that has elapsed is an obstacle. We cannot find any proof of worse things than drunkenness and brawling during the last year or two. And of the events before that time, when I know that she was untrue to me, we scarcely see how to obtain absolute proof. You must forgive me for mentioning these things to you, but I am obliged."

"Yes, and there is no reason why you should not tell me everything," she said, turning her quiet eyes upon him with a look of such perfect trust that the tumult in Alan's mind was suddenly stilled. "But you knew that there would be difficulties. Is there anything else?"

"I hardly know how to tell you. She has done what I half expected her to do—she has brought a counter charge against me—against——"

"Ah, I understand. All the more reason, Alan, why we should fight it out."

"My love," he said, in the lowest possible tone that could reach her ears, "if you knew how it grieves me that you should suffer!"

"But I am suffering with you," she answered tenderly; "and don't you think that I would rather do that than see you bear your suffering alone?"

Here the first notes of the orchestra fell upon their ear, and the conversation had to cease. For the next hour or so they had scarcely time to do more than interchange a word or two, but they sat side by side rapt in a strange content. The music filled their veins with intoxicating delight; it was of a kind that Lettice rejoiced in exceedingly, and that Alan loved without quite knowing why. The Tannhauser Overture, the Walküren-Ritt, two of Schubert's loveliest songs, and the less exciting but more easily comprehensible productions of an earlier classical composer, were the chief items of the first part of the concert. Then came an interval, after which the rest of the afternoon would be devoted to the Choral Symphony. But during this interval Alan hastened to make the most of his opportunity.

"We shall have a bitter time," he murmured in her ear, feeling, nevertheless, that nothing was bitter which would bring him eventually to her side.

She smiled a little. "Leave it alone then," she said, half mockingly. "Go your own way and be at peace."

"Lettice! I can never be at peace now without you."

"Is not that very unreasonable of you?" she asked, speaking lightly because she felt so deeply. The joy of his presence was almost oppressive. She had longed for it so often, and it had come to her for these two short hours so unexpectedly, that it nearly overwhelmed her.

"No, dearest, it is most natural. I have nobody to love, to trust, but you. Tell me that you feel as I do, that you want to be mine—mine wholly, and then I shall fight with a better heart, and be as brave as you have always been."

"Be brave, then," she said with a shadowy smile. "Yes, Alan, if it is any help to you to know it, I shall be glad when we need never part."

"I sometimes wonder," he murmured, "whether that day will ever come!"

"Oh, yes, it will come," she answered gently. "I think that after our long days of darkness there is sunshine for us—somewhere—by and by."

And then the music began, and as the two listened to the mighty harmonies, their hands met and clasped each other under cover of the book which Lettice held, and their hearts seemed to beat in unison as the joyous choral music pealed out across the hall—

> "Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
> Tochter aus Elysium,
> Wir betreten feuértrunken,
> Himmlische, dein Heiligthum,
> Deine Zauber binden wieder,
> Was die Mode streng getheilt;
> Alle Menschen werden Bruder,
> Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt."

"I feel," said Alan, as they lingered for a moment in the dimness of the gallery when the symphony was over, and the crowd was slowly filing out into Regent Street and Piccadilly, "I feel as if that hymn of joy were the prelude to some new and happier life."

And Lettice smiled in answer, but a little sadly, for she saw no happier life before them but one, which must be reached through tortuous courses of perplexity and pain.

The dream of joy had culminated in that brief, impulsive, unconscious transmigration of soul and soul; but with the cessation of the music it dissolved again. The realities of their condition began to crowd upon them as they left the hall. But the disillusion came gradually. They still knew and felt that they were supremely happy; and as they waited for the cab, into which Alan insisted on putting her, she looked at him with a bright and grateful smile.

"I am so glad I saw you. It has been perfect," she said.

He had made her take his arm—more for the sake of closer contact than for any necessity of the crowd—and he pressed it as she spoke.

"It is not quite over yet," he said. "Let me take you home."

"Thank you, no. Not to-day, Alàn. See, there is an empty hansom."

He did not gainsay her, but helped her carefully into the cab, and, when she was seated, leaned forward to clasp her hand and speak a parting word. But it was not yet spoken when, with a sharp cry, Lettice started and cast herself in front of him, as though to protect him from a danger which he could not see.

In the confused press of men and women, horses and carriages, which filled the street at this hour from side to side, she had suddenly caught sight of a never-forgotten face—a hungry face, full of malice, full of a wicked exultation, keen for revenge.

Cora Walcott, crossing the road, and halting for a moment at the central landing-place, was gazing at the people as they poured out of St. James' Hall. As Alan helped Lettice into the hansom and bent forward to speak to her, she recognized him at once.

Without a pause she plunged madly into the labyrinth of moving carriages and cabs; and it was then that Lettice saw her, less than three yards away, and apparently in the act of hurling a missile from her uplifted hand.

It was all the work of an instant. The woman shrieked with impotent rage; the drivers shouted and stormed at her; men and women, seeing her danger, cried out in their excitement; and, just as she came within reach of her husband's cab, she was struck by the shaft of a passing brougham, and fell beneath the horse's hoofs.

It was Lettice's hands that raised the insensible body from the mire. It was Alan who lifted her into an empty cab, and took her to the nearest hospital—whence she never emerged again until her last narrow home had been made ready to receive her.

Cora did not regain consciousness before she died. There was no death-bed confession, no clearing of her husband's name from the dishonor which she had brought upon it, no reawakening of any kind. Alan would have to go through the world unabsolved by any justification that she was capable of giving. But, with Lettice at his side, he was strong enough, brave enough, to hear Society's verdict on his character with a smile, and to confront the world steadily, knowing what a coward thing its censure not unfrequently is, and how conscious courage and purity can cause it to slink away abashed.

On a certain evening, early in the session of 1885, some half-dozen men were gathered together in a quiet angle of the members' smoking-room at the Oligarchy Club.

During the past day or two there had been unwonted jubilation in every corner of the Oligarchy, and with reason, as the Oligarchs naturally thought; for Mr. Gladstone's second Administration had suddenly come to an end. It had puzzled many good Conservatives to understand how that Administration, burdened by an accumulation of blunders and disasters, was able to endure so long; but at any rate the hour of doom had struck at last, and jubilation was natural enough amongst those who were likely, or thought they were likely, to profit by the change.

Sir John Pynsent and his friends had been discussing with much animation the probable distribution of the patronage which the see-saw of party government had now placed in the hands of the Conservative leader. Sir John, whose opinion on this subject was specially valued by his political associates, had already nominated the Cabinet and filled up most of the subordinate offices; and he had not omitted to bestow a place of honor and emolument upon his ambitious relative, Sydney Campion.

The good-natured baronet was due that evening at the house of Lord Montagu Plumley, and he hurried away to keep his appointment. When he had gone the conversation became less general and more unrestrained, and there were even a few notes of scepticism in regard to some of Sir John's nominations.

"Plumley is safe enough," said Mr. Charles Milton. "He has worked hard to bring about this result, and it would be impossible for the new Premier to pass him over. But it is quite another matter when you come to talk about Plumley's friends, or his friends' friends. I for one shall be very much surprised if Campion gets the solicitorship."

"He's not half a bad sort," said Tom Willoughby, "and his name is being put forward in the papers as though some people thought he had a very good chance."

"Ah, yes, we know how that kind of thing is worked. The point most in his favor is that there are not half-a-dozen men in Parliament good enough for the post."

"What is the objection to him?"

"I don't say there is any objection. He is not a man who makes many friends: and I fancy some of his best cases have been won more by luck than by judgment. Then he has made one or two decidedly big mistakes. He will never be quite forgiven for taking up that prosecution of Walcott for a purely personal object. I know the late Attorney was much put out when he found how he had been utilized in that affair."

"Pynsent seems to think him pretty sure of the offer."

"Just so; and if anyone can help him to it, Pynsent is the man. That marriage was the best thing Campion ever did for himself, in more ways than one. He wants holding in and keeping straight; and his wife has him well in hand, as everybody can see"

"They seem a very happy couple."

"He is devoted to her, that is plain enough; and I never thought he had it in him to care for anybody but himself. I met them last Easter at Dalton's place. They seemed to hit off extremely well."

"Oh, she has improved him; there is no doubt about that. She is a very charming woman. What on earth does Dalton do with himself at Angleford?"

"He has become an orchard man on a grand scale," said Willoughby "Three years ago he planted nearly a hundred acres with the best young stocks he could find, and he says he has every apple in the *Pomona* worth eating or cooking."

"He has got over that affair with Campion's sister, I suppose?"

"I don't know that he has. Brooke Dalton's one of the finest fellows in existence: there's a heart in him somewhere, and he does not easily forget. I came upon him and Campion one day in the garden, and though they knew I was close to them they went on talking about her and her husband. 'You were always too hard on her, Sydney,' Brooke was saying, 'and now you have admitted as much.' 'I don't wish to be hard on *her*, but I can't bear that man,' Campion said—meaning Walcott, of course. 'Well,' Dalton said, 'I am perfectly sure that she would not have stuck to him through thick and thin, so bravely and so purely, unless she had been convinced of his innocence. As I believe in her, I am bound to believe in him. Don't you think so?' he said, turning to me. 'I hope every one who knows her will show her the respect and reverence that she deserves. Now that they have come back to England, Edith is going to call on her at once.' Edith is his sister, you know: and she tells my mother that she called immediately."

"How did Campion take it?"

"Very well, indeed. He said, 'You were alwaysa good fellow, Brooke, and I may have been mistaken.' New thing to hear Campion owning up, isn't it?"

"So the Walcotts have come back?" said Milton, with some excitement. "By Jove, I shall leave my card to-morrow. Of course, he was innocent. I knew all about it, for I defended him at the Old Bailey. No wonder Campion is uncomfortable about it."

The idea seemed to divert Milton very much, and he chuckled over it for two or three minutes.

"From what my mother says," Willoughby continued, "people seem disposed to take them up. Her books, you know, are awfully popular—and didn't you see how well the papers spoke of his last poems? You mark my words—there will be a run upon the Walcotts by and by."

"Just the way of the world!" said Charles Milton. "Three or four years ago they would have lynched him. Poor devil! I remember when I was about the only man in London who refused to believe him guilty."

"One thing is plain enough," said Tom Willoughby. "He would have gone to the dogs long ago if it had not been for her. I have not come across many heroines in my time, though I have heard of plenty from other people; but I am bound to confess that I never heard of one who deserved the name better than Mrs. Walcott.

The world bestowed its free pardon upon Alan Walcott, and for the sake of her who had taught him to fight against despair and death he accepted graciously a gift which otherwise would have been useless to him. Inspired by her, he had built a new life upon the ruins of his past; and if, henceforth, he lived and labored for the world, it was only with the new motives and the new energy which she had implanted in him.

The house at Chiswick is now their own. There Alan and Lettice crown the joys of a peaceful existence by remembering the sorrows of other days; and there, in the years to come, they will teach their children the faith of human sympathy, the hope of human effort, and the charity of service and sacrifice.

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